

**Reading:** Ezekiel 37:1-14

**Theme:** The Valley of Dry Bones.

In our lives there can be times when things seem so dry and joyless – hobbies, careers, friendships and even our Christian life. We can even feel things go from bad to worse, then may degenerate to hopelessness and this can occur even if we are God's people and our walk with God and delight in Him seems a far distant memory and experience. Imagine how we would have felt if we had been taken captive with the Jews from Jerusalem and marched off 1,000 miles to Babylon. For some 10 years there had been a message of hope from '*prophets*' who proclaimed "*Peace, peace*" that Jerusalem would be spared and all the captives returned. Yet Jeremiah had said 'No' to all this, and then a frustrated priest called Ezekiel also started saying that there was no way this would happen, that Jerusalem would be destroyed and the ones who said otherwise were false prophets. Then one day news arrived in Babylon that Jerusalem had been destroyed (33:21). Surely our hope would have evaporated and left us in despair. This is what happened to the people of God in captivity - **v11b**. The future looked utterly hopeless for them and they never expected to return to Jerusalem.

This vision of Ezekiel is quite remarkable and is a picture parable, a vivid parable in vision which brought glorious truth from God concerning the future restoration of His people even when there seemed no hope. I want us to look at this vision of the Valley of Dry Bones (v1-14). Ezekiel had a number of visions and in this vision he is taken away from Babylon by the Spirit and placed in the middle of a valley - he has a number of these visionary journeys in this book. This is a vision and its aim will be to teach us one or two main things and we are not to build a system of theology from it and do violence and injustice to so much in it. There is one main truth being taught here and it is simply that **there is only hope with God even in the most hopeless of situations** – this is to greatly encourage us. Note 4 things:

## **1. Hopeless Assessment (v1-2)**

Ezekiel saw a gruesome sight; the unburied, skeletal remains of a fallen army. We are not told the number, but the valley is full of bones and as the Lord leads him to and fro among them he saw a great many bones that had been there for a long time and he notes they were very dry. Perhaps some of us have seen or read Lord of the Rings and the many battles which occur in it, especially in the last book, The Return of the King. The valley Ezekiel saw in this vision looks like it has been the scene of the great battle, with probably thousands killed, their bodies left to rot, decay, been scavenged as carrion and then in this dry valley these bones were bleached and weathered. It was a scene of complete, utter desolation and hopelessness.

We are told what these bones are in **v11** - the whole house of Israel. Jerusalem had been destroyed and all the people there in Judah and in captivity in Babylon had lost all hope of restoration and of being a nation again. They seemed as hopeless as the very dry bones in that valley. There are times in our lives and church that we feel we are in utterly hopeless situations, can do nothing about it for ourselves and our future looks bleak. Maybe someone here knows they are not a Christian and you feel there is no hope for you as you know your past or present life, ways and attitudes. Please keep listening and you will learn there is hope for you, for all - for God is the God of hope.

## **2. Hesitant Answer (v3)**

Picture Ezekiel standing there among all these very dry bones and then the Lord asks him "*Son of man, can these bones live?*" If we had seen the utter hopelessness of this dead army, having all the scientific and medical knowledge available at this our time, I wonder what our answer would have been! Humanly speaking there was no way those bones could live. We might philosophise about extracting DNA and trying to clone a person, but there was no way **those** actual

bones could live. Ezekiel probably felt the same; but he knew he was talking with the Lord God, the Sovereign Lord and so he referred the matter to God's Almighty power and all knowing. He could not see a way, but he knew his God was not limited. In other words, Ezekiel said that even though it looked utterly hopeless; knowing his God, meant that he couldn't rule out anything because his God was the God of the surprising and impossible. Any possibility of life must come from the intervention of an outside force, one who alone had power to give life - God Himself.

Although it looked impossible to the Jews for the nation to be restored and independent i.e. live again, God was driving home to them that He could do something unbelievable and humanly impossible. In our lives and situations do we realise that God can surprise us, shock us with what He can do - even as things seem to have crumbled to pieces around us, left us in a dejected and hopeless state. He is able to do far more than we can ever ask or imagine (Eph 3:20: Jer 33:3 [AV]). Do we realise that? It is not just for our desperate, hopeless times, but in every situation of life we enter into. There is hope for our lives – no matter where we are at this time or what we have done.

### **3. Heavenly Activity (v4-10)**

In these verses we see the Lord showing that He is just that - the Almighty, the all-powerful Creator and sovereign God of the universe and of all life. Yes, it was by His powerful working, but this God would use the means He appointed to bring these scattered bones together and have these dry bones come back to life. Ezekiel was ordered to prophesy to these bones (v4)! He was to give them a message from God. I have preached to some unresponsive congregations over the years, told people about the gospel and they didn't want to hear, but I think Ezekiel wins hands down when he had to preach to an army of very dry bones and say "*Hear the word of the Lord!*" Ezekiel obeyed all God told him and preached the

message of what the sovereign Lord would do for these dry bones. It is quite a graphic description in v4-6.

As Ezekiel in this vision declared God's word, incredible things happened - v7-8. Can we imagine the computer generated images of this event? Yet as Ezekiel was there in the vision, all these things incredibly, by divine power, happened - a noise, a rattling sound, bones came correctly together, bone to bone and then all the flesh, tendons and skin came upon them. Ezekiel must have been a mighty fine preacher! Actually it didn't depend on him at all, he was just the mouthpiece to declare God's word and these things happened because of the power of God upon him and his message. Ezekiel just didn't do these things on his own, giving his own ideas and words. It was God's almighty work. The Lord had told him to tell the bones that the Lord would put His breath in them. Ezekiel was told to prophesy, to cry out, some say to pray for the breath to come and breathe life into the slain (v9).

This section pictures the work of God the Holy Spirit. The word "*spirit*" in both the Hebrew and Greek is a picture word. The words can be used of breath, wind or spirit (including the Holy Spirit). The words picture breath breathed, or panted out, as when you blow out candles on a birthday cake, or as some of us puff and blow when we run! When we tell the story of the 3 pigs and the big bad wolf and as we get to the huff and puff and blow your house down bit, we are picturing air made to move vigorously and violently and the picture it expresses is of energy let loose, of power being exercised – this is the idea of the words used. We know how powerful the wind can be and have witnessed it on TV or personally. During this chapter the word "*spirit*" refers to breath, wind and the Holy Spirit in quick succession. The invisible Holy Spirit is all powerful and He becomes '*visible*' as He works.

No man or woman could have given these dry bones any life at all. Their only hope was for God to work. Ezekiel could have preached his heart out and not one bone would have come to another bone. Yet his ministry was empowered by God the Holy Spirit, for whom he had prayed, called to come and work with a prophetic authority. For anyone to preach or speak God's word, especially the message of the cross, is foolishness, is treated as a joke and laughable by men and women who are dead in trespasses and sins. As clever as we are, as great are the techniques and methods that we could use, we can do no eternal good to anyone because they are blind and deaf to the things of God, in complete and utter spiritual darkness and dead in trespasses and sins.

It does not depend our reasoning or our clever arguments, but like Ezekiel we are to call for the breath, the wind from God to come – the person and work of the Holy Spirit, so that as the word is proclaimed He will take it and use it in a glorious way to open blind eyes, unstop deaf ears, to give light to dark minds and hearts, to bring life where there was only very dry deadness. That is why it is so important that we pray and call upon God to work. As much as I would like to be clever, witty, bring lofty and compelling arguments, I would much rather know a great empowering and anointing of my preaching by the Spirit of God and then people would know that God can use the humblest and frailest of people in His work, so that He can have all the glory.

Pray that God would send His Holy Spirit in a powerful and mighty way upon the entire ministry and witnessing of the church here, even if it seems most times we are telling "*very dry bones*", for our God can do amazing things. Pray that the same Holy Spirit would come in might and power upon our lives in our situations of life that we find ourselves in and He would give us the hope, strength, encouragement, wisdom etc that we need in such a situation. If someone here is not a Christian, feel you could never be one, then

call on God to come and deal with you through the word of God being used by the Holy Spirit and to give you hope and eternal life.

#### **4. Hopeful Application (v11-14)**

Ezekiel's initial message was to his generation who felt very dried up, finished with and had no hope. Yet God, the Sovereign Lord, would do great things for them, for He was not limited by their supposed dry bones of despair and helplessness. It would appear that He would open up the graves that they felt they were buried in, that He would bring them up from them by His Spirit on them and they would live and He would settle them in their own land. They would know at that time that the sovereign Lord had spoken and done as He said. This God doesn't say empty words, but He always fulfils everything He says - both His promises and also His warnings. In an incredible way the people, decades later, woke up one morning and had the announcement that they could return back to their own land - we read of it at the end of 2 Chronicles and at the start of Ezra. Read it and see that it was of God's might and power; that He was fulfilling all He promised here. What seemed so impossible was brought about by the Sovereign Lord of heaven.

Ever wondered what the people felt like when that happened? We can read of it in Psalm 126 - I will just read v1-3 *"When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, We were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, And our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD **has** done great things for us, And we are glad."*

The situation of the Church and of our land seems hopeless and helpless; it seems dead and barren both spiritually and morally. God and His ways are being abandoned. Things seem to be getting worse and many cannot see any hope of it getting better, but the Sovereign

Lord knows and He can do things that will surprise us. It may be impossible to man, but never to the Lord.

You may feel the same sense of hopelessness about Wheatley, or even about this church itself - in that nothing or little seems to be happening, things seem so dry and barren and you could never imagine God working here. We can feel the same about members of our family and our friends. We have prayed for them, we have lived Christian lives for them to see, we have spoken to them about God and our Saviour and they seem as dry, very dry bones. It breaks our hearts that we are hopeless, poor and ineffective witnesses. Some here may be grieving that their children, parents, marriage partner, relations, friends and colleagues have no time for God and the Lord Jesus, and such ones may even actively speak against Him. We can wonder what is the point of speaking about our God and Saviour or if it is worth doing so again. We had hoped for so long that they would be converted, but they seem harder than ever to reach out to and our hope has faded, evaporated and we feel completely hopeless concerning them.

It could be that we are in a difficult and hopeless situation in our own lives. It doesn't seem that God reigns, but confusion, darkness, hostility and bitterness seem to be dominating and reigning in our lives and relationships. We feel utterly hopeless and we can do nothing. It could be we feel we are too bad, done too much wrong and God could not save us, that salvation, new life is for others who are nicer and better than us. There is hope for you - for Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – even the worst of people.

In all the situations I've mentioned we are to realise that the Sovereign Lord is still on the throne, is still mighty and He can work and accomplish things that seem impossible and too incredible for us to even imagine. We are to be faithful to Him and we are to call upon Him to work by His mighty Holy Spirit. We can achieve little

of any eternal value unless we are serious with God in prayer, for Him to work for His glory and honour, but also in His way and time. Our land could be transformed in a short time - God has done so before when He came by the power of the Holy Spirit as His word has been preached - we call it revival, but it is the work of the Sovereign Lord through His word being declared by, in and through the lives of His people. That is what is needed here in Doncaster, we need it in our land and churches, in our lives as we live, speak and tell of our Saviour. That is why we do not give up, because God can break in to the lives of those around us in the town, in our families, in our workplaces and neighbourhoods. He can accomplish in a short time things that we could never do, even if we were given 10,000 lifetimes. Modern people, with modern problems and pressures, still have the old fundamental problem of being dead to God in their trespasses and sins, and only He can do them and you good as His Spirit uses the word of life to raise them from spiritual death.

We have every encouragement to tell men and women the gospel message. We serve a Sovereign God to whom nothing is impossible. He can save you, make you a Christian as He has saved others here already, and He can save others in the town, in our families and friends. We are to take our eyes off the problems and to focus on our great and glorious God and call on Him to work in a mighty way. William Carey said "*Expect great things from God; attempt great things from God.*" I pray we all would learn from this vision Ezekiel had and call on our God to first of all work in us, then others and for our Saviour to work in ways that will amaze and surprise us and we will know it is the Lord who has done it and willingly give Him all the glory.