

The hand of the Lord was upon me. He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley, which was full of bones. ²He had me pass through them and go all over among them. There were very many on the valley floor, and they were very dry.

³He said to me, “Son of man, can these dry bones live?” I answered, “Lord God, you know.” ⁴Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.’”

⁵This is what the Lord God says to these bones.

I am about to make breath enter you so that you will live. ⁶I will attach tendons to you. I will put flesh back on you. I will cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you will live. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded, and as I was prophesying there was a noise, a rattling, as the bones came together, one bone connecting to another. ⁸As I watched, tendons were attached to them, then flesh grew over them, and skin covered them. But there was no breath in them.

⁹Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the wind. Prophecy, son of man, and say to the wind that this is what the Lord God says. From the four winds, come, O wind, and breathe into these slain so that they may live.”

¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me. Breath entered them, and they came back to life. They stood on their feet, a very, very large army. ¹¹Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They are saying, ‘Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost. We have been completely cut off.’ ¹²Therefore, prophecy and say to them that this is what the Lord God says. My people, I am going to open your graves and raise you up from your graves and bring you back to the soil of Israel. ¹³Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live. I will settle you on your own land, and you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.” (EHV)

Theme: The Spirit Breathes Life

1. To a valley of dry bones
2. To us, dead in our sins

The Holy Spirit is often the forgotten person of the Trinity. We know about Jesus, of course, because he came down from heaven to pay for our sins by taking our place on the cross, dying and rising again, defeating our enemies of sin, death, and the devil. We know about the Father, of course, who loved us and gave up his one and only Son, and who created the world by just his voice in six days. And we know that the Holy Spirit exists, he is real, the third person of the Triune God, but we often forget about him. Just as we forget about his festival! Many, even unbelievers, celebrate Christmas, when the Father gave us his one and only Son; and we celebrate Good Friday and Easter when Jesus won for us the ultimate victory. But not too many hold special celebrations for Pentecost! Because the Holy Spirit works behind the scenes, so to speak, and is not as visible or notable as the Father or the Son, we often forget about him. But

that doesn't make the Holy Spirit or his work any less important for our salvation. Without him we do not live eternally, but with him we do—for the Spirit breathes life into us.

The Prophet Ezekiel began his ministry in exile. He was part of a group of Jews that were deported to Babylon before the destruction of Jerusalem. A few years later God called him to prophesy to the people in exile, while at the same time Jeremiah prophesied to those still in Jerusalem. Their message was essentially the same: Jerusalem was going to be destroyed because of the sins of the people. Both prophets were clearly direct in this consequence of their actions. But both Jeremiah and Ezekiel had good news for the people. In Ezekiel 36, for example—the chapter before our text, Ezekiel assures the people that God's children would eventually return to the Promised Land. Jeremiah tells us that it would be about 70 years from the time the first Jews were taken away into exile from when the first group returned. But the people in exile knew their sins; they knew that whatever happened to them they deserved it all. And so, God gave Ezekiel another vision for the comfort and assurance of his people.

The vision is a striking and a memorable one! The Lord showed Ezekiel a great big valley, full of bones. And these bones had long ceased to be alive, there was no flesh on them whatsoever; they were completely dry. God told him exactly what was going to happen: Ezekiel would prophesy to the bones and the Lord would bring them to life.

So when God told Ezekiel to speak, that is exactly what he did. First, he prophesied to the bones and Ezekiel heard a great rattle and the bones began to organize themselves into skeletons, then tendons attached to the bones, soon flesh and skin covered the skeletons. But they still weren't alive. So the Lord said to Ezekiel, **Prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind that this is what the Lord God says. From the four winds, come, O wind, and breathe into these slain so that they may live.** And that is what the prophet did. And when he prophesied the Lord breathed into them the breath of life; they stood up on their feet, and it was large army!

Again, it's a striking and memorable vision. But what exactly does it mean? Some are mistaken thinking that this is a direct prophecy about the resurrection from the dead, probably a reference to the Last Day when the Lord will give life to all who have died. And while that certainly is a good thought, and there is somewhat of a spiritual connection there, but according to God it's not the purpose of the vision.

For the meaning we turn to verse 11, where the Lord tells us what the bones represent, **these bones are the whole house of Israel. They are saying, 'Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost. We have been completely cut off.'** The dry bones represent the hope that the Israelites had—the hope that they would return to Jerusalem, that they would remain a people and wouldn't be lost to history. They heard the promise of the Lord in the previous chapter, but it was too hard to believe—it seemed as if they would remain in Babylon forever, they had lost hope, it had all dried up. In their minds, the chances that they would ever return home were completely and utterly dead. And so we see how the Lord responds in verse 14, **I will settle you in your own land.**

But, when Israel returned to the Promised Land from exile, no one was raised from the dead—in fact, most of those in exile didn't return right away! And so it is obvious that we are not dealing with a physical resurrection from the dead, but an even greater phenomenon with far-reaching, eternal consequences. There is a deeper, spiritual meaning tied into the valley of dry bones. This refers to a new spiritual life provided by the Holy Spirit.

It's a prophecy of how the Holy Spirit would bring the Israelites back to faith in him. He led them to repentance and faith and returned them to spiritual Israel. And closely connected with the return of Spiritual Israel, is the coming of the Promised Messiah, who we know is the Resurrection and the Life! Once the people of Israel returned to the Promised Land, rebuilt Jerusalem, and were settled in their homeland—and more importantly: when their hearts were set on the Lord once again, the table was set for the Promised Savior to come. So above all else, this

is a prophecy of the Holy Spirit working faith and repentance into the hearts of his people once again and giving them a new life—a new spiritual life.

But what does all of this have to do with us? We aren't Israel, we aren't in exile, we aren't without hope that we won't ever return to the Promised Land. So what's this have to do with us? In a sense, the dry bones don't just represent the hopes of the people of Israel, they represent all of us by birth. We are the dead, life-less bones! What do we mean by that?

Paul says in Ephesians 2, **You were dead in your transgressions and sins.** And again in Colossians 2, **you were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh.** Not that we were physically dead, or eternally dead, but this is the third type of death that Scripture talks about—we were spiritually dead. And we were born that way. Yes, when we were first given physical life, we were spiritually dead. Just as those dry bones were completely incapable of coming back to life, so we were completely incapable of doing anything spiritually. We did not know God, we didn't care to know anything about him. We were born his enemies, whose grace and the message of the cross were considered foolish by us.

Many churches teach that we must accept Christ into our hearts, that we must make the decision to believe in Jesus if we want to be saved. But since we are spiritually dead by nature, we are completely unable to make the decision for Christ, we cannot choose to believe. If the choice was up to us to believe in Jesus or not, we would never choose to believe in our enemy or in something that is complete foolishness!

So how do we, dry bones, have faith? Through the Holy Spirit. Paul famously wrote in 1 Corinthians 12, **no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.** No one can believe in Jesus as their one and only Savior if the Holy Spirit had not worked faith into that person's heart. That is what the Holy Spirit does, he creates and sustains saving faith. And so he chose us, as Christ told his disciples, **you did not choose me, but I chose you.** Again, we don't choose to believe, the Lord chooses us and the Holy Spirit brings us to faith!

Think of the dry bones in our text for today. They were dead, dry as can be until the Ezekiel spoke and the spirit was given to them by the Lord. It's the same way with faith, we are completely dead in our unbelief until the Holy Spirit works faith into our hearts!

And it is faith that receives the blessings of salvation, the blessings that Christ won for us on the cross and by his resurrection. Jesus paid for our sins on the cross and he suffered our eternal damnation for us. Jesus defeated death when he rose from the dead and promises us eternal life through faith in him when we die. Just as Jesus gets all the credit for our forgiveness and eternal life, so the Holy Spirit gets all the credit for our faith. And without our faith, worked by the Holy Spirit, we don't live but die. The Lord gets all the credit for our salvation—each and every aspect of it! If we try to take credit for our faith, not only do we downplay the work of the Holy Spirit, but we are relying on ourselves for our salvation!

So we go back to what Paul wrote in Ephesians 2, **God, because he is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in trespasses. It is by grace you have been saved!** And we look at what he wrote in Colossians 2, **Even when you were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ by forgiving us all our trespasses.** Both passages teach the same thing. We were spiritually dead by nature, unable to do anything to save ourselves, so God in his never-ending love, his grace for us, saved us. He paid for our sins, he defeated death, and he brought us to faith—doing what we as dry bones couldn't do, he gave us a new life—we no longer are dead in sin, but alive with Christ who will live with him eternally.

The Holy Spirit creates and sustains saving faith through certain means. We call them the means of grace: the gospel in Word and Sacraments. Yes, the Holy Spirit could do whatever he wants—he could bring to faith through other means, but he doesn't because he chose to use the

gospel—and the gospel only. That means he doesn't bring to faith and sustain faith through prayer, or work, or fishing or some other hobby, or anything else outside the means of grace. And so we do what Ezekiel did. When the Lord told him to prophesy, that's exactly what he did. He prophesied. And when he prophesied, when he shared God's Word, the dry bones became alive. The same happens when we speak God's Word—the Holy Spirit works, creating and sustaining saving faith.

Think of the day of Pentecost. Yes, there's the tongues of fire and the speaking in tongues—but the greatest miracle of Pentecost was when Peter preached God's Word and over 3000 were brought to faith by the Holy Spirit that day! That's the power of the Holy Spirit!

The Valley of Dry Bones is a striking and memorable portion of Scripture. Ezekiel spoke God's Word and the valley full of dry bones was given life! The whole world is a valley full of dry bones—we included. But just as the Holy Spirit worked through Ezekiel, he worked through Peter, and he works through us! So, the gospel is shared, the Holy Spirit works and gives new life as creates faith in people of all nations. The Holy Spirit may often be forgotten, but his work is no any less when it comes to our salvation, for he breathes into us the breath of life! Amen.