

The Valley of Dry Bones

King David wrote about the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23) and he knew his subject. David knew great



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victories as well as the calamities resulting from his own ego and selfishness, but he also knew the restoration God's grace can bring to us in the darkness. Israel has come to the darkest night of the soul, when every day is more disastrous than the previous and it seems they are no more than a valley of dry bones. For years they have chosen to live without God – no place is darker than that – yet God has continued to speak to them through the prophet Ezekiel. We understand what those children of Israel are feeling because we know about the loss of a loved one, financial disaster, a shattered marriage, and the feeling that God has exited from our world. Has Israel finally come to the end, all hope exhausted, crushed by their guilt, believing the future offers nothing? But in the place of failure Ezekiel shows up to say, “the Lord's power overcame me” as a vision of hope appears where there seems to be no possibility.

After the first thirty-three overwhelmingly depressing chapters of Ezekiel, chapter 37 breaks through the gloom with what most people remember about this prophet. Ezekiel “was in the Lord's spirit” as he looked out over what appears to be the remains of a bloody battlefield, littered with the bones of a dead army. There is no impressive military cemetery with beautifully regimented grave stones, fluttering banners, and monuments to heroes. There is only death and decay as God asks his prophet, “Can these bones live again?” (v. 3). The answer seems obvious.

Is there hope when the battle is over? Is there hope when people have abandoned all that is true and good? Choices can be devastating, but what happens when we ignore God, build our lives around selfishness and cannot seem to tell right from wrong? Is there a point of no return, when the flesh has rotted from the bones and nothing is left to revive? Ezekiel knows only one answer, and it may stretch his faith to its limit: “Lord God, only you know” if the

bones can live again.

God responds to Ezekiel, drawing him into the scene of death and reminding him that we do not have all the answers: “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the Lord's word! The Lord God proclaims to these bones I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again’” (v. 5). The verb used “to breathe” in verse 9 is the same verb used in Genesis 2:7 where God formed the first man from the dust of the ground and breathed the breath of life into him. In Ezekiel's vision God is about to breathe life into dead bones that represent “the entire house of Israel” (v. 11). This promise is specifically for the Jews in what seems a hopeless exile who say, “Our bones have dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished.” Our English translation of “finished” actually means “to be cut off” (v. 11). Psalm 88:4-5 is a similar statement of separation from God: “I am considered as one of those plummeting into the pit. I am like those who are beyond help, drifting among the dead, lying in the grave, like dead bodies – there you don't remember anymore, those who are cut off from your power.”

Depression robs a person of hope. People I have talked with described their depression as a darkness that smothered every day, a sense that no one cared about them, an effort to just draw a breath or get dressed in the morning. Tomorrow offers nothing, the exiles may have said, because we have lost our identity, God does not hear our prayers and Jerusalem is only a ruin. They had hoped to go home, but the years were passing and nothing had changed. They resigned themselves to an impersonal fate.

So how do you defeat fate? Psalm 62:5 teaches: “My soul, wait in silence for God only, for my hope is from Him, He only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be shaken.” God speaks to his prophet with this startling vision of a valley filled with dry bones as those bones came together, sinew, flesh and skin, and finally the breath of life. God describes what he is doing for his people who spurned his love and embraced the world: “I'm opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves, my people, and I will

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bring you to Israel's fertile land. You will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my people. I will put my breath in you, and you will live” (vv. 12b-14).

This is the kind of hope only God can give. This vision of dry bones living again is beyond human achievement and only possible with the God who is creator of all and can breathe life into us. The Old Testament preserves many stories about the miracle of God's forgiveness, new beginnings and life that overcomes all the darkness and failures of this world. This vision is used by the Jews even in our day during their Passover celebration as they celebrate God's faithfulness and affirm their hope to return to Jerusalem as God has promised. The Christian lectionary uses this passage on three different occasions in the cycle of three years: Lent, Easter, Pentecost. In each usage the emphasis is on God's promise and gift of grace that brings new life. Without the hope God provides there can be no dry bones coming alive, no recovery from tragedy, no strength to overcome the odds of life, no life beyond the struggles of this world.

We know the rest of this story, the return to a ruined Jerusalem, the rebuilding, and a repeat of the cycle of turning away from God. We also know that God does not give up on us. We learn from Israel, but we still repeat their mistakes. With the passing of generations, our violations and inhumane actions, we begin to see how much we need God. The promise of the Savior flows like a melody of hope from Genesis to Revelation, its grace inviting us to better choices and ultimately to experience the gift of new life through Jesus Christ. Dry bones can live again and so can you if you give yourself to him who has already given himself for you on the cross. Hear once more what God said to Elijah as he looked over that valley of death: “I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again.”

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