

The Promise of a New Life

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[0 : 00] As Joe said, I guess the big thing I want us to think about this evening is this issue of hope. I always remember when I did RE in school, which was religious education.

I don't know what that was like for you guys, if you ever did RE or RNPS in school. For me, I didn't learn a lot about religion, but we watched a lot of movies.

So we all loved RE in school. And our RE class didn't often have passages from Scripture or other religious texts on the walls. What it did have was movie posters.

And I remember this one poster, it was from the film *The Shawshank Redemption*. And it was the kind of title poster of the film. And if you've ever seen the film, it's about this prisoner who was wrongly convicted called Andy Dufresne. And the whole film's about hope, about his desire to vindicate himself and escape from Shawshank prison. And the image of the poster was Andy Dufresne after he had crawled through this sewage pipe out to freedom. And he's looking up at the sky with his hands like that. The rain is pouring down on his face. And underneath, there was the tagline for the film which said, fear will hold you prisoner, but hope will set you free. I've always remembered that.

Because there's something powerful about that phrase, and there's truth in it. Like, we need hope. Every human being needs to have something that they hope in. Particularly when life is hard, when life is fearful, when you're going through real difficulties. We need hope.

[1 : 52] What we don't need, though, is false hope. In the film *Shawshank*, there's another character called Red. And he says this to Andy Dufresne. He says, let me tell you something, my friend.

Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane. And he's right to an extent. If our hope is built on the wrong thing, then it can cause more damage than it can liberation.

Today, I guess, if you were to ask people, what would you build your hope upon in life when times are getting hard? I guess people might build their hope upon their achievements. They might build their hope upon their finance. They might build their hope upon politics, upon the goodness of humanity.

They might build their hope upon their family and their friends. Some of these are good things. But ultimately, you cannot build your hope upon them in life, because even if they don't let you down, and to be honest, a lot of the time they will, even if they don't let you down, these things can never last.

You can't build your hope upon anything in this world, because everything in this world is fading away. It's fragile. See, the only hope we can have that would be real and solid and certain would have to be a hope that could outlast death itself. And therefore, the hope that we need ultimately has to come from the God who made us, who is eternal. And what you see in the Bible is that God and His eternal plan of salvation speaks a hope into humanity that is unlike anything else. And even in the darkest times, you will never lose this hope. Never. In fact, that vision that we just read, Ezekiel 37, you may have heard that before. You may know the song, *Dem Bones, Dem Bones, Dem Dry Bones*.

[4 : 11] I don't know if it's based on that, maybe. That vision was spoken to God's people Israel in a time of utter hopelessness at probably what was the lowest moment of their history.

And it's a vision that God speaks to them to give them hope for the future. That even though they're in this dark time, there is a future for them that will not be taken away from them, a future hope that death itself will not be able to destroy. And so, what I want to do this evening is look at this passage, try and understand a bit of the context. Where does this come from, this vision in Ezekiel?

And then I want us to see how it gave hope to Israel 2,600 years ago, and how it gives hope to the church of Jesus today. So, we're going to look at two points. Firstly, we're going to see Israel's hopeless situation, and then secondly, we'll see God's hope-filled solution. Let's look at this first thing then, Israel's hopeless situation. Let me give a bit of context. We're going back in time here to 600 years, roughly 600 years before the birth of Jesus. At this time, for those of you that don't know, if you're new to the Bible, at the time before Christ, God's people were really one nation, the nation of Israel. They were unique. God had chosen them, and He had given Israel all His promises of how He was going to bring blessing and salvation to the world through them. He promised them that they would have a king who would bring in the kingdom of God and establish God's rule forever. He promised them that they would have their own land, and that God Himself would dwell among them in that place. Basically, God's plan to save the world was all tied to the promises that He gave to this nation. But when you come to the book of Ezekiel, you come to a time in Israel's history where everything has gone catastrophically wrong.

You see, for hundreds of years, Israel had chose to rebel against God, to go their own way. In fact, you know, this nation was kind of, it was meant to be like a light to the other nations. They were meant to show the world what God is like and the way they conducted themselves. But they did stuff that was so horrible that the other nations were looking in and thinking, that's disgusting. And so, they were misrepresenting God, and they were doing it for such a long time. And God warned them. He spoke to His people through individuals called prophets. And He said to them, look, if you keep going down this path, you are going to lose everything. But they didn't listen. [7:08] And so, after a long time of warning, God brought judgment on this nation. First of all, He took out the northern part of Israel. He sent an empire called Assyria to destroy them until all that was left was this southern kingdom that was known as Judah. But the people of Judah were just as bad as their kingsmen in the north. And so, in the year 592 BC, God raised up the mighty empire of Babylon to invade Judah and the capital city of Jerusalem. And the Babylonians sacked the city, put many to death, and those that survived, they took away with them back to Babylon as prisoners.

And one of the guys that they took back was this man, Ezekiel. And it was through Ezekiel that God decided to speak to the exiles in Babylon. Now, most of the exiles, here was their mentality at this time. They'd been taken away, but Jerusalem was still there, the temple was still there, and so they thought, hey, it'll be fine. We'll get back. We'll get back. Everything's going to be fine. Jerusalem's still standing. It's going to be totally okay. But God's message through Ezekiel in the first 24 chapters of this book has just been one big message. Do not put your hope in going back to Jerusalem.

I am going to destroy that wicked city and raise my temple to the ground. That's what Ezekiel preached for years. And just like today, people then did not take God's message of judgment seriously.

But then it happened. Ezekiel chapter 33 verse 21 is the turning point in the entire book. A messenger comes from Jerusalem to Ezekiel, and he says just four words, the city has fallen. Babylon has returned. Jerusalem's been razed to the ground.

The temple's been destroyed. The temple's been destroyed. And it's all gone. It's all gone. All that's left now are these prisoners in Babylon. Prophet Jeremiah tells us there was about 4,000 of them. 4,000 left of the entire nation. You probably get more people attend a match at Petaudry than was left of God's time. All gone. These people have no king, no land, no temple, no assurance of God's presence, and no hope. This is the darkest moment in their history. But then from chapter 33 onwards, Ezekiel is told to proclaim to these exiles a new message, not of judgment, but of hope.

[10:20] Although they had been faithless, God was still going to be faithful. And he had a plan. And right at the heart of this message of hope is this vision here in Ezekiel chapter 37. But you can see that the vision begins very bleakly. It begins by trying to capture the hopelessness of what they're feeling. Look at verse 1. Ezekiel is transported in his vision to a valley of bones, a valley of death. Now, picture in your mind, let's just try and get into what this would have been like. Picture in your mind what it would be like to look through Ezekiel's eyes and see this. It would have been absolutely horrendous.

Picture a great valley, and as far as the eye can see, there are bones everywhere, like some kind of enormous mass grave after a genocide. Ezekiel's standing in the middle of it. And as he walks through it, he would have heard the crunch of these bones beneath his feet, a skull, a ribcage, a femur, littering this valley. And it's shocking. And God's walking him through it. Verse 2, And he led

me round among them. And behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley. And behold, they were very dry. Why does that matter that they're dry? What does that tell us? It tells us that these bones have been dead for a long, long time.

What does all this mean? Why is Ezekiel shown this? Well, we don't have to speculate because we've got the vision in verse 1 to 10, but verse 11 to 14 tell us what the vision means.

So look at verse 11. What do these dry bones represent? Verse 11, What is this representative of, Ezekiel? This is a picture of Israel.

[12 : 33] This is a picture of the exiles that Ezekiel is preaching to in Babylon. They're not literally dead. They've survived the exile. But the image of dry bones conveys the fact that they might as well be dead. It conveys this idea of being just utterly cut off from God. They have nothing. They're just bereft of hope. I mean, look at that cry in verse 11. You can feel the pain. Our hope is lost.

If you've ever been in a situation where you feel, I have no hope, or if you've known someone who's been in a situation where they feel they have no hope, that's a really dark place to be.

There's nowhere to go. Just darkness. Pile of dead bones. Everyone knows you can't reverse death.

Now, we are not in the same situation as the exiles of Ezekiel's time. But here's the thing. If you read through the Bible, you can see that this image of these dry bones is actually a good picture of humanity without God.

This is all of us dead. Spiritually dead to the God who made us. In fact, in Ephesians chapter 2 verse 1, the apostle Paul says to the Ephesian Christians that this is what they were like before they followed Jesus. He says, you were dead in your trespasses and sins. These dead bones, yes, they are Israel, but it's also a great picture of humanity, of a humanity that is cut off from the God who made us because of our sin, lost without any hope, spiritually dead and subject to physical death.

[14 : 30] And what can we do? Answer, we can do nothing. Speaking to a guy this morning who's new to church, and he said, what can I do to absolve the mistakes that I've made in my past?

He said, nothing. But God can do something. We can try and build up hope in this life, but the tides of time will wash it all away.

We are cut off. Our situation, without Jesus before God, is as hopeless as dead bones littering a valley.

But mercifully, the God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is big into the business of resurrection. And that's where the hope comes.

Here's the second point. God's hope-filled solution. Let's go back in the valley. Let's join Ezekiel. Look through his eyes. Let's stand with him a bit longer and see what happens.

[15 : 45] Ezekiel hears God speak to him, and he says in verse 4, prophesy over these bones, and say to them, dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. So Ezekiel is called to go and preach to the dead bones.

That's a tough gig. Sometimes, when I stand up the front preaching, you can see the folks dozing. You think we can't, but we can. Ezekiel's audience are literally dead.

They've been dead a long time. And then something amazing happens. As he is preaching, the bones start to move. Hundreds of thousands of bones start to rattle.

You ever heard that noise? I hope not. The sound of hundreds of thousands of bones rattling. In fact, in the Hebrew, the word for rattling there in verse 7, I think there's a footnote on it.

Yes, there is. There's a footnote. That word for rattling is a word that's used for an earthquake. So, as these bones shake, don't think a little baby's rattle.

[16 : 54] Think a humongous earthquake, an ear-splitting sound. And then these bones, they start to come together. They start to form a skeleton. And then sinews start to appear on the skeleton.

Then flesh starts to appear. Then skin. I mean, this must have been an incredible vision. In my head, here's how I picture it. This is maybe not helpful at all.

But, you know that scene in Indiana Jones where the Nazi guy looks at the Ark of the Covenant and then his face melts off and it's just his skeleton. I picture that, but in reverse.

But it's happening, not just with one person, but with a whole host of individuals. And before long, Ezekiel has all these bodies standing before him. And he's just preaching.

He's just preaching. And all these bodies are standing there. But they're not quite alive. They need breath. And so, verse 9, Ezekiel is called to prophesy to the breath.

[17 : 53] Now, the word for breath used in verse 9 is the Hebrew word, ruach, which is also the same word for spirit.

So, the bodies need God's spirit to bring them to life, God's breath. And notice as well that the way God's spirit comes into these bones is through the preaching of his word.

Ezekiel has to keep preaching, keep prophesying, and then the spirit of God gives them life. You know, for the original hearers, this image was, for us who may be familiar with the Bible, this image is meant to conjure up in our minds, Genesis chapter 2.

Way back in the beginning of the Bible, when God first created Adam, what did he do? He first formed the man and then he breathed into him and gave him life. And so, what is God saying he is going to do with these exiles?

He's saying he's going to renew them. He's going to restore them. It's as if he's going to remake them into a new humanity.

[19 : 07] With this image of these people made alive by God's spirit, we see four wonderful promises of hope for Israel and for the church today.

What are they? Here's the first. We see the hope of a people made new by the spirit of God. God is going to completely restore his people by his spirit.

And we can think, well, you know, this is a vision, and so it's obviously a reference to the fact that God is going to bring them out of Israel, out of the death of the exile and back to their own land.

And that is what he's showing them here. But there's something way bigger than just relocation going on with this vision. We just read in Ezekiel 36, what does God plan to do with his people?

He's going to change them from the inside out, change their hearts of stone to hearts of flesh. God's not just promising relocation, he's promising a radical spiritual transformation from the inside out.

[20 : 22] He's going to get rid of their sin and its consequences and make them new, and the scale of that promise as you read through the Bible, you see that that goes beyond Israel to all the nations of the world through Jesus.

Jesus came to wipe clean all of our sin. He came to suffer for it in our place. And he did that not just so that we could be forgiven, but so we could be made new, so that we could be united to him.

And so when you come to trust in Jesus, you move from being dead in sin to being made alive by his spirit.

That's why in that letter to the Ephesians, after Paul has reminded the church that they were once dead in their sins and transgressions, he goes on to say this, but because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved. If you follow Jesus this morning, God's spirit, his ruach, his breath, has broken into your life.

[21 : 45] life. And he is changing you, making you new. You are what Ezekiel saw. A vast amount of people transformed by the Spirit of God.

Hearts of stone transformed into hearts of flesh. How do I know that that's happened to me? Well, you know it's happened to you because you hate your sin, you long for Jesus.

You know that God's spirit's at work in your life transforming you because here's the big thing we see in the passage. You know God. You know what he is like.

He's not abstract or distant. Did you notice that that's the defining feature of these people? Verse 6, look at what God says, and you shall live and you shall know that I am the Lord.

Lord. Verse 13, and you shall know that I am the Lord. Verse 14, and I will put my spirit within you and you shall live and I will place you in your own land, then you shall know that I am the Lord.

[22 : 58] God's spirit has transformed you because you know God. Previously, you couldn't give two hoots about him, but now you know him. He's your king. You know him.

He's your father. father. If you know him like that, if you hate your sin and you long for Jesus, you were someone who was once dead, but now you are alive.

You are, as Paul says elsewhere in Ephesians, a new humanity. And so you have the hope that God has saved you and that God is with you.

He's made you new. Second promise of hope this vision gives is the hope of a great multitude. This is what's really significant about this. Look at verse 10.

So I prophesied as he commanded me and the breath came into them and they lived and stood on their feet an exceedingly great army. Not used to using the ESV translation.

[24 : 01] Exceedingly. I've never heard that used apart from describing Mr. Kipling's cakes. It means vast, great. Ezekiel sees standing before him this vast, great, exceedingly great army.

Why is that significant? Because the promise Israel had given to their forefather Abraham was that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. Now all the promises of God at this time, all of them at the time of the exile seemed like they were going to fall flat.

Remember, there's only a handful of people here. But in these chapters of Ezekiel, God is showing how he will keep his promise despite Israel's failure.

There will be a great multitude transformed by God's Spirit through God's Word. And whilst Israel did indeed return to their land and increase, the fulfillment of this happened much later when Jesus came into this world and then his apostles went out into the world with the Word of God by the power of God's Spirit.

And what you see is that what began in Israel spread throughout the entire world and is still spreading today. You see, when we go out and share God's Word, we don't do it alone.

[25 : 36] God's Spirit is still working. He's still bringing new life to people and there will be an exceedingly great multitude that will respond. That's why one of the real hopes we have as Christians is the hope that mission does work.

Just think how you became a Christian. It wasn't because you worked it out. It wasn't because you were brought up in a Christian home. These are all things that God might have used.

You were, as we say in Dundee, you were dead. You were dead. But Jesus made you alive. You heard His Word.

You were changed by His Spirit. And so, folks, here's what we must get in our minds. We desperately want the people of Aberdeen to know the good news of Jesus Christ. We want them to know that because without this good news, there is no hope.

If you don't know Jesus, there is no hope outside of Him. And yet, it's difficult to tell people about Jesus.

[26 : 45] But here is what we must get in our minds. Do not think that evangelism, telling others about Jesus, don't think that it's hard. It's not hard.

It's impossible. We need to see that it's not hard. It's impossible. If we think it's hard, then we'll try and come up with strategies to make it easier, and then we quickly make it all about us.

But if we recognize it's impossible, we are freed from trusting ourselves, and we remember that it's all about God. People are spiritually dead.

Evangelism is like going into a graveyard and yelling at the bodies, come back to life. It's impossible for us, but not for God.

Can God save people in this town? Can the thousands out there who don't know about Jesus come to a living, saving faith in Him? Can my workmates or my family or those who take the rip out of me for following Jesus come to have faith in Him?

[27 : 52] or let me rephrase it like this. Can these bones live? It's the question, isn't it, that God asks Ezekiel in verse 3.

Can these bones live? Humanly speaking, no. But I love Ezekiel's response. He doesn't say no, and he doesn't presume that God will.

He just throws himself onto God's sovereignty, Lord, you know. God knows. And he can bring life. We just need to go out with this word and let his word do his work by his spirit.

And who knows what he will do. Don't tell God the bones can't live. You, Lord, know. And we do know that in the end, there will be an exceedingly great amount of people.

people. So, let that drive us to go out in hope, confidence that God can bring life. Thirdly, we have here the hope of resurrection.

[29 : 07] You know, the vision, commentators will talk about how this vision is a metaphor. you know, it's about returning back home to the land of Israel.

And certainly, that's what this vision is talking about. But look at the way God speaks. Look at verse 12 when he's describing what this is.

Therefore, prophesy and say to them, thus says the Lord God, behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you into the land of Israel and you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people.

There's something bigger going on here. And we can't read that through the lens of Christ and not see what he is talking about.

You see, going to the land in the Old Testament, it was always a picture of going not just to a place, but into the presence of God, going to live with God. It was a picture of heaven, of going home to him.

[30 : 21] And God speaks here to Ezekiel twice of opening up graves and raising people from their graves. This is more than just going back to the land.

This is the promise God is giving of resurrection hope, of his people being literally raised from the dead to new life with him. death. In John chapter 5, Jesus says, the hour is coming when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of Man and those who hear will live.

Death will not be the end. The Apostle Paul says that we have hope only for this life and we are to be pitied more than anyone else, but we don't.

We have hope now and hope beyond the grave. Jesus has died for our sins so that we could be with him forever in a new land, a new creation that is free from sin and suffering and tears and death.

That's the eternal, unshakable hope of the gospel. It's a hope that has caused hundreds of thousands of Christians throughout the ages to be willing to hold on to their faith at the cost of their lives because they know that their king has risen.

[31 : 41] Death does not have the final word for us. Jesus has removed its sting and flipped it on its head. He has taken that curse against mankind and used it as our gateway to paradise.

He will open up the graves and raise his people to new life. All of this hope is so certain, so guaranteed.

Do you know why? Because of this fourth and final point. It's so certain because God said he would do it.

Look at the end of verse 14. Then you shall know that I am the Lord. I have spoken and I will do it, declares the Lord.

God said to Why is this guaranteed to happen? Because God says so and God always, always, always does what he says.

[32 : 49] How comforting to these prisoners in Babylon. God had said to them through Ezekiel multiple times, Jerusalem's going to be destroyed, Jerusalem's going to be destroyed, and they didn't believe it, but it happened.

Because God always does what he says. But as they look back on the certainty of the judgment that came with God's word, now they can look forward to the certainty of the hope that comes with God's word.

He has said he is going to renew them. He has said he's going to make them into a vast army. He has said he's going to take them home. It will happen. Why? Because he has said it.

Folks, we have the hope of new life now. We have the hope of life with Jesus forever. We have the hope that the gospel will go out to the ends of the world, and nothing will stop it.

And it's so certain, it's so unmovable, it's so guaranteed, because it's not rooted in us and how faithful we are, it's rooted in God and how faithful he is.

[33 : 57] And he always does what he says. There's nothing that can kill this hope. It's a hope in the God who undoes death, a hope achieved through death.

How can you kill that? Andy Dufresne said to his friend, read, hope is a good thing, and no good thing truly dies.

The Christian hope is the best thing, and it can never die, because it's tethered to the one who lives. There was a famous missionary called D.L.

Moody, and he said this, someday you will read in the papers that D.L. Moody of East Northfield is dead. Don't you believe a word of it? At that moment, I shall be more alive than I am now.

There's one thing you see throughout the entire book of Ezekiel, is that God takes the impossible and reverses it. He takes sinners and will make us into saints.

[35 : 11] He takes the stone and makes it into flesh. He takes the dead and raises them to new life, and it's a guarantee because he has said it, and he always, always does what he says.

I am the Lord, I have spoken, and I will do it. That is the hope we have in this world that's full of uncertainty.

Let me pray. Father, thank you for this vision. thank you, Lord, for the hope that it must have given your people all those years ago.

Though they had done great wrong, though they were in exiles, and they had lost everything, yet, Lord, you spoke to them, and through your prophet you gave them this vision of how you were going to renew and restore them, of how you were going to take them home, of how you were going to raise them to new life.

Father, we thank you that 2,600 years on from when you originally spoke this, we can see how this vision plays out. As people all across this world have been changed and transformed by your Holy Spirit, brought into your kingdom, a vast amount of people.

[36 : 32] Father, we thank you that we have that hope of resurrection cemented through the resurrection of your son, Jesus. Father, we thank you for the hope of new life, of new birth.

And Father, we pray that we would understand the hope of the gospel, would it empower and enable us to move forward with confidence that we are your children, that we are saved, that we have a mission that you want us to be part of that will never fail.

Father, would we go out and proclaim this wonderful news, knowing that you can make the dead bones come back to life. Father, I challenge and encourage and enable us through your word, we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. you