

Hope for the Hopeless. Ezekiel 37:1-14

Hope

We have felt the importance of hope this year.

The restrictions would have been unbearable if we had not had hope that they would be successful, hope that the disease would be controlled by them and the time would come when restrictions would be eased

In fact we probably felt our mood go up and down as our conviction of that hope was stronger or weaker, as we felt that time nearer or further away

How many of us, for example, felt gutted when our hope was disappointed at that press conference on the 18th October when the relaxation of restrictions and re-opening of businesses was delayed by two new cases, and elated a week later as restrictions were eased.

We have felt the importance of hope.

And there was always hope

Because, as the saying goes, where there is life there is hope.

Ecclesiastes puts that truth more pithily 'A living dog is better than a dead lion', and we know that is true instinctively, for we know that the one 'who is joined to the living has hope.' Eccles. 9:4

But the dead – whatever their power or status or wealth – have no hope

No hope in themselves – their hopes, of improvement and recovery, of justice or love, of life, of enjoying the good of created life – the warmth of the sun, the thrill of touch, the taste of food, the satisfaction of achievement, the richness of colour, have all perished with them

Death puts you beyond human hope.

The ancient Israelites felt this, perhaps even more than we do.

Their culture had no optimistic and empty beliefs about the dead going to the stars or the angels, looking down on us.

The dead went to Sheol as mere shades, unable to know joy or happiness, unable to enjoy taste or touch, just existing, waiting for judgment without hope

But in Ezekiel we hear God giving hope to the hopeless – not just to those without hope in Ezekiel's day. This promise is so big that here there is hope for us as well, hope when we are beyond all human hope, as we one day will be

A hope of life beyond death that spills over into every part of our lives now.

Hope where there is no hope

Dry bones vv. 1-10

Ezekiel 37: The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. ² And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry.

It is an extraordinary scene the LORD has brought Ezekiel to.

A valley full of bones, and the Lord leads Ezekiel around so that he can get a grasp of their extent – the place is full of them – piled up, scattered about, and they are very dry – a bit like the bones of dead sheep you might have come across in a drought affected paddock, pecked clean of all flesh by the crows, scoured by the ants, bleached by the sun

Ezekiel is witnessing the aftermath of some shocking catastrophe

And it would have been even more disturbing for him, for proper burial was a sacred duty.

To die unburied, to have your body left as food for vultures, was a sign of being cursed

One of the curses on covenant breakers recorded in Deut 28:

*Deuteronomy 28:*²⁵ *“The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You shall go out one way against them and flee seven ways before them. And you shall be a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth.”*²⁶ *And your dead body shall be food for all birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth, and there shall be no one to frighten them away.*

Ezekiel is witnessing the outcome of some long past, perhaps repeated, catastrophe

For the bones are very dry – these are not the recent dead

And as he is taking it all in, feeling the horror of what he sees, the Lord asks him a question

*Ezekiel 37:*³ *And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.”*

You would have felt the obvious answer was no.

Life is long departed from a dry bone, and was not coming back.

But Ezekiel had seen the vision of God. He knew God’s reality and greatness

And Ezekiel was Heir of God’s revelation of Himself

He knew God had said He is the One who kills and makes alive

*Deut 32:*³⁹ *“See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.*

Cf. 1 Samuel 2:6

And he knew God had said to Abraham that nothing is too hard, is impossible for Him

*Genesis 18:*¹⁴ *Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.”*

He said that and then brought life, Isaac, from the deadness of Sarah’s womb

And He had repeated that to Ezekiel’s contemporary Jeremiah

*Jeremiah 32:*²⁶ *The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah:*²⁷ *“Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is anything too hard for me?”*

And so Ezekiel replied “O Lord GOD, you know.”

That is – it really is up to you Lord God who lives

And so the LORD give Him an extraordinary command

Ears may have bones, but bones no ears, yet Ezekiel is to address them. God has confidence in the power of His word

Ezekiel 37: ⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath [ruach] to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath [ruach] in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

Even though it seems to make no sense, trusting the LORD, whose word has always proved true in Ezekiel’s experience – Ezekiel does as He is commanded

Ezekiel 37: ⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath [ruach] in them.

It must have been an extraordinary sight – and noisy

But there is no breath, they are still lifeless, just corpses

So the Lord again commands Ezekiel to prophesy

Ezekiel 37: ⁹ Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath [ruach]; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath [ruach], Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds [ruach], O breath [ruach], and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath [ruach] came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

It helps us understand the relation of the winds to the breath if we understand they are the same word in Hebrew - ruach

That word is translated at different points in this passage as Breath, wind, and Spirit – the Spirit we have met in Ezekiel 36:27 where God promised new life to dead Israel saying “And I will put my Spirit within you...”

The Spirit of which God again promises 37:14 “And I will put my Spirit within you and you shall live ..

The coming of the wind, ruach, to breathe breath [ruach] into these bodies to give them life, is a picture of both the necessity and the power of the Spirit to give life.

But Why the delay?

It is for emphasis.

Firstly it focuses our attention on that necessity, the necessity of breath, or Spirit, for life, for the animation of these dead bodies.

No breath, no spirit, no life.

It emphasises that this life for dead bones is dependent entirely on God giving them life. There is no life within them. It must come to them at God's command, from God's Spirit.

The pause emphasising the necessity of the Spirit for life also emphasises the relation of the coming of the Spirit to the Word – the Spirit comes through the word, in response to the Word. Life for these corpses is dependent on, comes through, the prophetic word preached.

And this pause also links this account of giving life to Genesis – to the creation of the first man Adam in Genesis 2:7. There God formed man from the dust of the earth and then animated that body by breathing into his nostrils the breath of life. Life was dependent on God's gift of breath. What we are seeing in this valley is like a new creation through the Word of God.

And all testify to the LORD's life giving power

It is His winds, His Spirit

It is His Word

The LORD alone is the source of this life. The bones contribute nothing, and Ezekiel is speaking the Word of the Lord as He is commanded. The power of this word is its origin in God, not the one who speaks it.

Having witnessed the creation of this vast living host from that mass of dead, dry bones through the Word and Spirit of God the LORD now applies what Ezekiel has seen to Israel

A shattered people vv. 11-14

Ezekiel 37: ¹¹ Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.'

In Israel's view they were as a people, as a nation as good as dead, completely finished. They are without hope.

In their despair and despondency the LORD doesn't direct them to themselves.

He doesn't tell them we can get through this together, or suggest if they just changed their attitude to be more positive they would find a solution.

And he doesn't challenge their assessment

They spoke the truth, truer than they knew. Their suffering the consequences of judgment on their sin, suffering the curses that came upon covenant breakers, exiled from the land with Jerusalem destroyed, their king in captivity, sacrifice ceased, was a sign of a deeper death. The death of alienation, separation from God, the source of all life, the death of sin.

But in their hopelessness, the hopelessness of the dead, the LORD directs them to have hope in Him, in what He promises to do.

And the LORD is very specific

Ezekiel 37: ¹² 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. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my

people. 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; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD."

This is hope for the dead, based on a renewed relationship with the LORD.

HE addresses them as 'my people' – twice, vv. 12 and 13

And he looks to that time v.14 He has already promised in Ezekiel 36 where they would have a living heart in place of their dead, their stony heart, when the LORD puts His Spirit in them.

At that time He will open their graves, and raise them from their graves

And they will live – live, never to die again

They will come again to their land, that place where they live in the LORD's presence – where they will know Him, know that HE is the LORD, the only God

Know that HE is their God, acknowledge Him as their LORD, committed to them because He is committed to His gracious promises.

The LORD is committed wholly to this

I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD."

To the dead the LORD promises resurrection life

Not more of the same as this life

But life in relationship with Him, life sustained by His Spirit, life HE alone gives, life promised to undeserving people suffering judgment for sin

The LORD is saying that what He had pictured for Ezekiel in that valley of dry bones He will do for Israel

At this point some want to say that Ezk. 37 is just describing the restoration of national Israel, that what Ezk 37 is assuring the exiles of is their continuing life as a nation. It is giving hope that the exiles will survive and some, or their descendants, will get back to the land

That return may well have been unexpected and miraculous, but the language of Ezekiel 37 tells you God is speaking of something more than survivors going back to Palestine and re-establishing themselves there.

That mass of bones is not from just one generation, or just one defeat. It is v. 11 'the whole house of Israel' which as the rest of chapter 37 makes clear includes the tribes of the Northern Kingdom, those who were slain and lost more than 100 years before. That vision is looking for more than the return of the exiles

And the LORD speaks explicitly of opening their graves, raising them from their graves – twice, repeating His promise in vv. 12 and 13. This is speaking of life for the dead.

And this is life from a completely different source, life that comes from the Spirit of God – not the continuation of this life

This is the restoration of Israel through resurrection and new life

There is more promised here than a return from exile, more to be hoped for

This is hope beyond the grave, hope for those without hope – including us and all people

God promises that in Israel suffering the death of judgment – dried bones - death will be overcome and life will come through God's powerful Word and Spirit

But that death of judgment is the death we are all in and all face. The entire race is under the judgement of death for our sin, dry bones, with no hope in ourselves

And as the death Israel is suffering is the death we all suffer, so the life Israel is promised, life through the Word and Spirit of God, is the life we all need, our hope of life.

This is a powerful vision and stirring words, words of hope for all

But will the LORD keep His promise, His promise of life for the dead?

And can we be included?

A sure hope – the risen one who can raise the dead

Yes and Yes

God has already fulfilled this promise in and through one Israelite – the LORD Jesus, and through fulfilling the promise in Him has guaranteed its fulfilment to all who are His by faith, all who believe His gospel whatever their background.

Big idea, let me unpack it for you.

The LORD Jesus, son of Abraham, is the one true covenant keeper, the true Israelite, the heir of all God has promised Israel in His word.

The Lord Jesus died the death of judgment on sin, not His own sin, but ours. But dying on that cross, hanging on that tree, He is also enduring the covenant curse on lawbreakers.

That is what Paul tells us – Christ became a curse for us, for it is written cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree. Gal. 3:13

He was the cursed dead, there under God's wrath, far from the life of God.

And HE was taken down from the cross, and buried in a tomb

And on the third day God opened His grave – rolled that stone away, and raised Him from the dead,

Raised Him from the dead – to greet Mary in the garden, to talk with Cleopas and his mate on the road to Emmaus, to eat broiled fish with the disciples in the upper room, to confront Thomas in His unbelief with His wounded side and nail pierced hands, to have a beach bbq with the disciples in Galilee, to appear to more than five hundred at one time

Risen in the body – not as a metaphor or symbol of renewal – but in reality

Risen in power by the Holy Spirit.

Ezekiel 37 is fulfilled in Him

And raised from the dead, having died the death we all deserve, He has become the one who can include all who trust Him in His resurrection life, share that promised life with us.

What He had given a sign of in raising Lazarus

Is now revealed as true for all through His death and rising

He had said to Martha then

John 11: ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

He is the resurrection and the life. And He is the source of that never dying resurrection life to all who believe in Him

The eternal Word He is now the giver of the Spirit, that powerful lifegiving Spirit, to all who believe His gospel

And that is All – whatever their background. We are all included in Abraham, included in the promises to Israel, through believing in Christ. The promises of Ezekiel 37 are for us.

[Gal. 3:27-29, Gal. 6:16; Romans 8:11]

The Lord has kept His promise and it includes us.

But as is obvious to all, especially to those of us getting older, we don't have those resurrection bodies yet.

These bodies still die. We are mortal, and haven't we been aware of that in this pandemic.

There is a now and a not yet in the fulfilment of the promises in Ezekiel

That's what Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 15

There is an order in the demonstration of Christ's victory over death as we heard 1 Cor. 15:20-23

1 Corinthians 15: ²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

But it is an order that assures us we will be raised

Now – Christ has been raised – the firstfruits, the first part of the harvest presented to God that guarantees the rest of the harvest,

And Christ's resurrection is not the only fulfillment we see now

Now we have the Spirit, and as Christ's resurrection guarantees the not yet of our resurrection, so does the present possession of the Spirit

As Paul says when speaking of the believer's eternal habitation, that is our resurrection body,

2 Cor. 5: ⁵ He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

The present possession of the Spirit promised to God's people in Ezekiel is the guarantee to us of the resurrection promised that we do not yet enjoy

But Seeing the power of God in raising Jesus from the dead
 Knowing the certainty of His Word – the grave has been opened
 Experiencing now the lifegiving power of God’s Spirit
 We are confident of that not yet – that is believers die with a sure hope.
 Think about that for a moment

Dying with hope

Might have felt the reality, even the nearness of death in this pandemic, a reminder of what is inevitable

But death need not be the end, the end of all hope of life

The living Jesus is the resurrection and the life – He gives life now, and will raise you then – if you believe His word

If you are not yet a believer

Consider

God is more powerful than death

He can give life through His word to those who have ignored and disobeyed God

Jesus His son promises to do that for all for all who will believe His word and turn and confess He is Lord, God’s eternal and almighty King who has died for their sin.

Death is real

Is God calling you to find life by trusting in Jesus

At the very least – you should find out if it is true

But if you are yearning for life, call out to the one who is the resurrection and the life

Lord Jesus, I am sorry for the way I have ignored and disobeyed you. Forgive me, and give me the new life you promise. He hears

If you are a believer I hope you faced the possibility of death visited upon you by this virus with a hope that testified to the life giving power of our God,

That rather than the destruction of our hopes you know death becomes the doorway to the fulfilment of all we hope for in Christ

We are a people always with hope even in ICU, even in the nursing home as our mind and body fail

For God keeps His Word

He has raised His Son

He has given us His powerful Spirit

Living with hope

Yet sometimes we confess this hope – and every believer does

We believe in a God who raises the dead from the first moment we believe the gospel

A God for whom nothing is too hard, for whom all things are possible

Sometimes we confess this hope yet can give way to despair and despondency

You might have felt that from time to time this year, for the year, the pressure of the lockdown and disruption, has exposed many of us

Brought us to see our frailty – we have had time to reflect on our life and think about our circumstances and how we are responding to them and recognised that we are not as strong or in control as we thought we were or wished to be

Or brought us to see our sin – as our grumbling or irritability or lack of thankfulness or angry words or private lust, exposed our hearts and we saw that we were not as godly as we thought or wished to be

Or it has brought frustration in other ways – you were praying that others turn to Jesus, humbled by this time, yet you have found it hard to get a hearing, hard to talk to others of repentance and faith in Jesus

And seeing your frailty or sin or lack of response you have felt at times overwhelmed, powerless, discouraged

Maybe feeling that even now as you feel the challenge of life returning to normal

Excited, but so much to do and your energy a bit depleted

I know I can feel overwhelmed and exposed when I look at what is involved in moving back to a situation where everyone can gather under these restrictions

We should not only face death with hope because the LORD can make dry bones live

We should live with hope

The Christian life is so often arguing with ourselves from the greater to the lesser

From the resurrection power that we know, the power of the God for whom nothing is too hard, the power of word and spirit to give life to dry bones, to the challenges of daily trusting in the Lord Jesus

What does thinking from the greater to the lesser mean for how we might feel about coming out of this time

Take that sense of being overwhelmed, of having had your frailty exposed, of not having the strength or energy or wisdom needed – even for the challenges of daily life

Well, we remember the almighty God says in His word to His apostle in his weakness, and to us through Him

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

The resurrection shows how true that is

What can be weaker than a corpse

What more magnificent and glorious than the risen body of Jesus

Our present weakness becomes the context in which that same power can be displayed, displayed in our living as His people

So Paul's response

"I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." 2 Cor. 12:9-10

So we can Confess

Lack of strength

Uncertainty about what to do, perplexities

Our inabilities

But not be overwhelmed. We trust our God – that He will be at work to bring Himself glory, to display His power, in our weakness, and give grace to discharge our ministry

Whether that is as a husband or wife, a parent, or serving with our gifts

Or think about our struggle with sin, a struggle you may have felt afresh over this time as you lost routine, were left more to yourself, experienced disappointment

Speak to the grieved heart, not the resigned heart that has accepted sin

We remember that there is forgiveness

But we hope for more.

God's word says we have been united to Christ by faith – that 'our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.' It continues that we have not only died with Christ, but 'that we were also raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.' [Rom 6:6, Col. 2:12]

We experience the power of Christ's risen life now through His Spirit, and through the Spirit we can put to death the misdeeds of the body, put to death sin. [Romans 8:10-15]

We do not need to be enslaved to sin, be always defeated by it

In fact as we give ourselves to the Spirit's work in us we should expect growth in godliness, in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control.

We don't need to be trapped in that anger and irritability, those harsh and demeaning words.

We don't need to fear that we won't break free of that porn addiction

We can live without envy

Change to become kind

Don't let the devil trick you into thinking you are the exception, the person God can't change.

Nothing is too hard for the LORD, including conforming you to the image of His Son

If He can free from the chains of death, He can free from the chains of sin as you keep listening to, heeding His word.

The Spirit that can live life to the dead can enliven and sustain in life your heart, your will, strengthening you to will to do His will.

So be resolute in putting sin to death and giving yourself each day to the powerful work of the Spirit in you – pursuing His fruit

An unbelieving world

And finally think of the task our Lord entrusted to His disciples, to each one of us

Of making disciples of all nations

You may have had some great conversations over this time

Even seen people come to repentance and faith

As I know some of you have.

But still be disappointed that so few have reconsidered their proud rejection of God

Be frustrated by how reluctant people are to engage with the gospel

Feel it is all too hard to shift people from their other loves – of money or pleasure or power, from their idols

Well – it is all too hard for us

Remember as the rich man walked away from Jesus His disciples asked Jesus who could be saved. And Jesus replied “With man, that is humanity, you and I, it is impossible.” Mark 10:27

Not just too hard for us, but impossible.

But Jesus continued – ‘But not with God, all things are possible with God.’

And that is what Ezekiel 37 witnesses to – the power of God’s mighty word to do the impossible, to bring dry bones to life

The gospel word has always been being preached to the dead, speaking to dry bones, calling on the deaf to hear and the blind to see – Eph. 2:1-3, John 5:24-26

And it has always been powerful to raise the dead, to do the work in its hearers that it commands, to bring the life giving Spirit into corpses

That is a work each believer knows for themselves, for we were dead in our sins, blind to Christ’s greatness until God shone the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ in our hearts, opened our ears to hear His word as the word of the living God calling for our trust and obedience, calling us to find life

You might look around you and think dead bones – beyond response, beyond hope

But the gospel word of Christ crucified for sin and raised from the dead, the word that summons to repentance and faith, that summons to life and love in relationship to the living God

Can raise the dead, unstop deaf ears, open blind eyes, bring hope to those beyond hope

So make it known – clearly and boldly, and confidently

I am not sure how Ezekiel felt as he started speaking to those bones – probably pretty stupid and hoping no one was watching

You might feel that as you start talking to your friends about someone who lived on this earth 2000 years ago and died in shame as a powerless victim – talking to them about how this person, Jesus, is the Lord who can give them eternal life, bring them peace, embrace them in a love that will never fail them

But Ezekiel trusted the God for whom nothing was impossible, and spoke, and saw life come to the dead

And you and I should too – and speak up, over and over and over again

I don't know where you are as we have a lull, or even the beginning of the end of this pandemic

But God's word calls us to put our hope wholly in the God whose word can raise the dead

To put our Hope in the God for whom nothing is impossible

Hope in our Saviour who has conquered death

Hope in His powerful word, the gospel word of Jesus

Hope in His life-giving Spirit, whom the LORD gives to all His people

And to live with hope

No longer fearful of death

Content to know your weakness for the display of His power

Forgiven for sin, but not enslaved to it

And keeping on speaking the word of Jesus to the dead knowing that like the word given to Ezekiel it is the power of life.

Ephesians 3:14-21