

“Can these bones live?” What does God say to you today? Yes! *“I will put my Spirit in you and you will live!”* But I want to caution you. We hear that, and we leave church so optimistic. “I can do it! It doesn’t matter what my past is. I have a fresh start. I can change things. I can do it!” I still remember the Sunday I preached my very first sermon in a church in Illinois. As people were walking out of church, a man said, “That was just what I needed to hear! Now I know I can do it. I’m going to quit my job and start my own business. I knew I had it in me!” He still didn’t get it. In fact, he totally missed it! The point is not, “I can do it!” Think about the bones. What can bones do? Nothing. They are dead!

That’s the point. Without God, we are dead—sinners! You can try to argue with that, of course, but it’s true. We can’t come to faith on our own. We can’t try a little harder and everything will be alright. We can’t fix it on our own! We’re dead. We need to know this. Do you know what the most incurable sickness is? The one that you don’t know you have. The most dangerous sickness is the one that you don’t know you have. How many people go through life in denial? Trusting in themselves but feeling dry and hopeless and used up. Because we really can’t do it. We’re nothing but a pile of bones.

But can these bones live? Yes! God has a history of making dead bones live. Life is not, “I can do it!” Life is knowing the Lord—his love and grace and forgiveness. When you feel guilty—“Can these bones live?” The answer is, “Yes! Jesus died to forgive you. He gives you new life by his grace.” When you feel old and frail—“Can these bones live?” The answer is, “Yes! They are going to live forever with Jesus in heaven!” He’s going to open up our graves and make our bodies come out new. God makes dead bones live! Who does all this? The Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit’s work is to breathe new life into dry bones with his forgiveness and hope and grace.

We want that! So it’s important for us to know how the Holy Spirit works. What was the first thing that Ezekiel said to those bones? *“Dry bones, hear the Word of the LORD!”* If you want the Spirit to work in your heart, what should you do? Hear the Word of the Lord! Sometimes I meet with people and they talk about this and talk about that, and talking is all fine and good, but the Spirit does not enter into your heart when you talk. You’ve got to stop talking and stop working and stop playing and hear the Word of the Lord! Then, *“I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.”*

I was touched last Sunday by the story of Chris Driesbach—the musician who came to our church. He grew up an atheist. He never believed in God. He got divorced. He was an alcoholic. What changed his life? His neighbor—a WELS pastor in Alaska—invited him to study the Bible together. Chris agreed because he liked a good argument! But there was no argument. For every question, the pastor read another Bible passage. Until one day Chris realized that he believed it. What changed this man’s heart? The Spirit used the Word to give him life. Now Chris—the former atheist—has played and talked at 760 different churches. Every believer has a story of God’s grace. What’s yours? Whatever it is, you can thank the Holy Spirit. *“Can these bones live?”* Yes!

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Pastor Nathan Nass

Pentecost
June 4, 2017

The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” I said, “O Sovereign LORD, you alone 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 Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.’” ⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” ¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army. ¹¹Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ ¹²Therefore prophecy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.’”

“Can These Bones Live?”

Did you know the Bible has a story like this? It’s strange. It’s a little creepy! God lifted up his prophet Ezekiel and took him to a valley full of bones. Dry bones. And God asked, *“Can these bones live?”* Ezekiel must have been thinking, “How am I supposed to know? You tell me!” So God had Ezekiel say, *“Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!”* And the bones started rattling together. It makes you shiver, doesn’t it? Then came tendons and muscles. Can you imagine this? Finally, Ezekiel called for breath to come, and the bones became alive. An army! Cool! But what on earth does this mean and why is it in the Bible?

To help us understand, I’m going to try something dangerous. I’m going to talk about history. Don’t tune me out yet! To understand all these bones, we need to talk about history of God’s people. What one man did Israel’s history start with? Abraham. God chose Abraham and his family to be his people. When did Abraham live? It’s an easy date: 2000 B.C. After Abraham died and his family grew, God’s people ended up in Egypt. Someone

had to lead the Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land. Who was that? Moses. When did Moses live? About 1500 B.C. This isn't so hard, is it?

After a long time in the Promised Land of Israel, the Israelites asked for a king. Do you remember who the most famous king was? King David. Do you know when David lived? 1000 B.C. God set this up to make it easy to remember— Abraham in 2000 B.C., Moses in 1500 B.C., David in 1000 B.C. Under David and his son Solomon, the nation of Israel was at its height. After Solomon, though, Israel split into two different countries, each with their own king. The northern kingdom was called Israel. The southern kingdom—with the capital city of Jerusalem—was called Judah. Are you with me so far? You might not like history, but this is important. It's God's story!

In the northern country of Israel, can you guess how many good kings they had over the years? Zero. Not a single one. In over two hundred years, not a single king in Israel believed in God. It was that bad! In the southern country of Judah, things were a little better. There were a few good kings like Josiah and Hezekiah. Every few generations, a faithful king would call his people back to God. In general, though, God's people rejected God and his Word. They wanted to be like the people around them, so they sinned. A lot!

But sin is never okay. It doesn't matter how many people are doing it! So God sent his prophets to Israel and Judah to encourage them to repent. He threatened destruction if they didn't. Can you think of the names of some prophets? Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel... This was their message: "Turn back to God. Stop rejecting God's Word. Repent and God will forgive you." Did the people listen? Remember how many good kings there were in the north? Zero. They never listened. So God destroyed them. In 722 B.C. the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. It was God's judgment on their sin.

So you'd think the people of Judah in the south would get it, right? Hear the Word of the Lord! Trust in him! But they didn't. So God destroyed them too. The Babylonians conquered the whole country of Judah and finally surrounded Jerusalem. They sat outside the city and waited for the people to starve. Thousands upon thousands died. Finally, in 586 B.C., the city fell. The few people who survived were carried off as captives to Babylon in Iraq. That's where Ezekiel lived. In exile in Babylon. How do you think those exiles felt? Here's what they were saying to each other, "*Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.*" Those exiles felt like dry bones.

We need to be clear about what the real problem was. It wasn't just that the Israelites were captives in a foreign land. Three times in these verses God explains his simple goal: "*Then they will know that I am the Lord.*" God wants us to know him. Real life is knowing the Lord—his love and forgiveness and will for our lives. Those Israelites didn't know God. So they were dead. Ezekiel describes the result of not knowing God: Violence, idols, treating parents with contempt, oppressing foreigners, mistreating widows, sexual sins, bribery, and to sum it all up, he says, "*and you have forgotten me, declares the Sovereign LORD*" (Ezekiel 22:12). Sound familiar?

So with all this—Israel's history—in his mind, Ezekiel walks through this valley of dry bones. He got it! The bones symbolized the people of Israel. And God asked, "*Can these bones live?*" What was the obvious answer? No way! Have you ever seen dry bones come to life? I hope not! The Israelites didn't deserve it. They were destroyed for good reason. "No, those bones can't live!" Except Ezekiel knew the LORD, and he knew God's grace. He knew God was up to something. So he said, "*O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.*" What was God's answer? God didn't say it—he rattled the bones together and put tendons on them and flesh and breath inside them. "*Can these bones live?*" Yes!

God wasn't done with his people! He gave Ezekiel this message: "*This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD.*" This is God's grace! Despite all that they had done, they were still God's people. God was going to let them return to their land of Israel. God was going to put his Spirit in their hearts. He was going to make sure they believed in the Lord. What an encouragement to those people in exile! Can these dry bones live? Yes! "*I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.*" The Spirit makes dead bones live by leading them to know God's grace.

Now fast forward to the day we're celebrating today: Pentecost. When did Pentecost take place? Can you remember our dates so far? Abraham? 2000 B.C. Moses? 1500 B.C. David? 1000 B.C. Exile in Babylon? 600 B.C. Pentecost? That's easy! The end of Jesus' life on earth—30 A.D. Filled with Holy Spirit, Peter gave a big speech about Jesus. He told those people, "*You, with the help of wicked men, put Jesus to death by nailing him to the cross*" (Acts 2:23). Those people had crucified Jesus! Maybe they hadn't driven the nails into his hands, but many had joined in the shouts of "Crucify him!" What would you say about the people who crucified Jesus? Dead, right? Like dry bones.

"*Can these bones live?*" Could there be hope even for the people who crucified Jesus? What would seem like the obvious answer? "No way!" Those people realized their sin and said to the disciples, "*Brothers, what shall we do?*" Peter replied, "*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 2:37-38). Was there hope even for the people who killed Jesus? Yes! Was there forgiveness even for people who had sinned in a big way? Yes! That is God's grace. "*Repent and be baptized...and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*" The Spirit makes dead bones live by leading them to know God's grace.

So can he do that even for us? You have a story too. What's your story? Does it sound at all like the stories we've talked about? Are you tempted—like those Israelites—to live like the people around you instead of being the people of God? Are there sins—like the Israelites—that you've held on to instead of Jesus, that you haven't wanted to give up? If our country were to be destroyed, I don't think we'd have any right to complain! Maybe, like those people on Pentecost, there was one big sin that you so wish you could take back. Do you feel like dry bones? You probably don't use those words. But how often don't we feel used, ashamed, guilty, worthless?