

He glanced back in horror. Behind him was home—where he'd grown up, made a name for himself, built a life. But now, it had all gone up in flames. He wept uncontrollably—tears streaming, nose running, chest heaving. All was lost—grief came over him.

See, ever since the Babylonians had stormed in, they'd sacked God's Holy City, desecrated the temple, made off with its sacred vessels, and now everything had been set ablaze. He could feel the heat licking his skin even from the distant tongues of fire. The oxygen was getting sucked out of the air, his breathing was stifled as smoke crept into his lungs. The dancing flames lit up the night sky and illuminated the darkness for miles around. He took in the sight one last time.

Then, he turned and looked ahead. He felt the yank of his chains—he was being pulled against his will toward Babylon, the place his captors called home. Behind him, his life was over, but ahead it felt even more like a dead end. After all, what was there for him in Babylon? Servitude, a hard life, forced to be a stranger in a strange land? That was no life for him, no way to live—he could feel himself dying inside.

That's exactly how Ezekiel put it. The prophet talks about the people of Judah as nothing but a valley of dry bones. They had lost everything—they'd been cut off from their Promised Land, wrenched from their homes, and now it felt like even God had been lost in the fire. He seemed to be gone, and so was His blessing—at best, He was miles away. This was a fate worse than death—God's people were the walking dead. It was a valley of dry bones alright, *very* dry bones.

That's how the Judeans felt more than 2,500 hundred years ago . . . and maybe that's how we feel this morning in 2018.

A man lies in a hospital bed—"I feel useless," he says. "I feel cut off from reality in here. My life is like dust slipping through my fingers." Do you feel like that man?

A woman says, "My children are grown. My husband has his work. I spend so many hours alone. What's my purpose in life now?" Are you that woman?

A teenager aches, "I don't know who I am!" He says, "What am I going to do with my life? Where am I going? What's to become of me?" Do feel like that young man?

A young mother sighs, "I have no time to myself. Life's nothing but drudgery from one day to the next. I used to have such hopes for the future, but now I don't know anymore. My life is filled up with so much, yet I feel so empty." Are you that young mother?

A young worker complains, "I thought I'd land my dream job by now. How long do I have to keep working this dead end job? When will my career finally begin?" Are you like that young worker?

Like the Judeans in Babylon, like people in today's world, are you a bag of bones—dry, lifeless, dead bones? Do you feel cut off from life as it's meant to be?

Yes, that's how the Judeans felt . . . and that's how you and I might feel . . . but even God Himself is no stranger to this. In the person of Jesus Christ, God the Son found Himself on a cross. There, His bones became all dried up, as Psalm 22 puts it—"I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. . . . My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; You lay me in the dust of death." Later, in Psalm 69, He goes on to say, "I am weary of my crying, my throat is dry." Some of His last words were even, "I thirst." Like the people, He too was cut off, as Isaiah 53 reminds us, "He was cut off from the land of the living." But crying out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me," Jesus was also cut off from God His Father.

Years ago, a ship on the Atlantic was in distress because its supply of fresh water had run out. The crew anticipated the worst—dying of thirst, even though they were surrounded by water. Just thinking about death by dehydration, they could already feel their bones drying up. But just when all hope was gone, they spotted a ship fast approaching them. At

once they sent out distress signals, that they had run out of water and that time itself was also running out. But the only answer they got from the other ship was, “Dip it up!” “Dip it up”? *What is that, some kinda cruel joke?* they wondered. After all, if they dipped their buckets into the sea, all they’d bring up would be salt water!

So, desperately, they signaled again, but only got the same answer. *What was this? What was going on?* Finally, out of options, not knowing what else to do, they eventually lowered down a bucket. Just imagine the hope that welled up in their hearts when, to their joy and amazement, the water they brought up was fresh, living water! Now, their thirst would be quenched and their spirits revived—no more dry bones! As it turned out, the sailors weren’t in the middle of salty waters at all, but were at the mouth of the mighty Amazon River—its fresh waters flowing far out to sea where they were.

The Judeans in the Babylonian Captivity might as well have been that ship on the Atlantic. “They said, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’” They thought it was all over for them—as far as the eye could see, there was salt water everywhere around them. But then, God tells Ezekiel to prophesy over them—“Dip it up!” He says. Now, it might’ve sounded crazy at first, but they came to find out that God’s had some fresh, living water waiting for them the whole time. “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. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land.”

No sooner had all seem lost, when Ezekiel witnesses something startling. All of a sudden, as if out of nowhere, their dry bones start rattling back together. Sinews—what we might more often call tendons or ligaments—begin to shoot forth. Then these skeletons gets fleshed out with muscle. And skin stretches over their bodies. But most of all, the Spirit of God, the very breath of life comes rushing into their lungs and before they know it, they’re back on their feet. And as Ezekiel reports it, there standing before him is none other than an exceedingly great army!

You see, all the while during their 70 years of exile, God was just waiting to set up a new king, Cyrus, who would put into each of their hands a one-way ticket for a return trip home. And not only that, but King Cyrus would even write the check himself to personally fund their temple rebuilding project. Like the ship’s crew, as soon as they feel like their bones are drying up, God says “Dip it up!” as He once again opens up the wells of salvation and pours out on them His abundant blessing. Maybe as they looked back at their history, it was now easy for them to see how God had been by their side, watching over His people without missing a beat. And maybe now, if you and I feel like a bag of bones ourselves, we can look back on our own personal histories and discover how God’s been carrying out His larger plan for us, just like He did for them. How God figuratively takes our very dry bones and opens up our metaphorical graves.

But y’know, something tells me that Ezekiel’s prophecy is even richer and fuller and more meaningful than just that. No, when we see what He did for Jesus Christ, we’re reminded that God’s not only interested in figurative bones or just metaphorical graves—but He’s especially interested in literal ones. After all, it was into the hopelessness of a real tomb, in real time, that God broke the silence. Prophesying over the dead bones of His own Son, He said, “Dip it up!” and they began to rattle to life. The decomposing sinews, and flesh, and skin of Jesus was made good as new. And when God’s living spirit rushed into Him, He was put back on His feet. Walking out into the sunshine, leaving that tomb far behind, there stood not just Jesus, but you could also say stood an exceedingly great army. Because in the one person of Jesus Christ, all of God’s people can be found—the Judeans, yes, but also you and I. Nothing will be able to keep us down either, but all of us follow right after Him out of the grave. Remember, one of His nicknames is “the firstborn from the dead,” which means He’s not the lastborn. But every one of us stands next in line.

So, today, if you’re feeling like a bag of bones—whether figuratively or even literally—what happened for Ezekiel’s very dry bones is happening right now for you. [*Whoosh!*] Even as we speak, God is busy prophesying over you. [*Whoosh!*] The living and active Word of God now blows through this place. [*Whoosh!*] His life-giving Spirit comes rushing into you, putting flesh on your bones and filling your sagging spirit with joy! That’s the power of the Gospel—it’s the very breath of God, enlivening you with salvation and quickening you with eternal life. He did it for the Judeans. He did it for Jesus. And He does it for you—today and forevermore. “Dip it up!”