

Faith triumphs in a hopeless situation

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Preacher: Rev Hugh G.Mackay

[0 : 00] Now to the chapter part of which we read, the book of the prophet Ezekiel chapter 37. Ezekiel chapter 37.

And the third verse. And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest.

Each of the prophets had his own particular gifts. And Ezekiel seems to have had a very poetic gift. A gift of seeing things in the concrete.

And so presenting them very clearly and very forcefully. And so was able to bring it home with tremendous effect.

Ezekiel was a man who was disturbed by the condition of his country. He was a Jew, of course, but he was living in exile in Babylon.

[1 : 15] He was carried there, not in the main deportation, but somewhat earlier than that.

When, at the end of the short reign of Jehoiakins, a great many of the notables in the land were carried away.

But he was able to keep in touch. And he was well informed of what was happening in Jerusalem. He knew that the city was under the heel of a heartless giant.

Its strength, its brains, and its wealth all cleaned off and carried away to Babylon. Jerusalem itself, by this time, heaps of rubble.

The temple robbed of its treasure. Standing there, stark and a charred ruin. And the remaining population of the Jews, utterly dejected and no doubt wringing their hands and saying, Aren't we living in terrible times?

[2 : 33] And then it was that the Lord showed to his people this rather grim and yet short-provoking and hopeful vision.

Remember, he took them out to a valley. A wide valley and the floor of the valley was covered with bones.

Bones of people who are long dead, bones dried and fleek. Bones of people who are long dead, bones dried and fleek. Ezekiel said to himself, That's just like our country.

And not only did Ezekiel say it, but God said it. Son of man, he said, These bones are the whole house of Israel. It was our vision of utter desolation.

And to the people at large, it was our vision of utter hopelessness. The house of Israel say, Our bones are dried, our hope is lost. We are cut off.

[3 : 48] And yet God used that very desolation to present a challenge. And so should the condition of our own country, at this very hour, present a challenge to us.

Because the lesson of this chapter in our word is this. That there is nothing impossible with God.

And so looking particularly at this verse of our text, keeping in mind the whole of this vision, we find first of all that Ezekiel was presented with a test of a desperate situation.

There's no glossing over the facts. The state of the country was pictured exactly. On the one hand, there was evidence of former vitality.

These bones had been the bones of people. They had been the bones of soldiers. They had once been an army. All armed and ready for the battle.

Now there was nothing but dry, wizard, and bleak bones. It was a picture of the nation of Israel. Because Israel had had a former glory.

[5 : 15] Once she was strong. She'd never been a very large nation. Although there was a time when she was fairly large. But she had certainly been a force to be reckoned with.

But for a long time she'd become decadent. Declension had set in over many generations. Idolatry and immorality had tapped the strength of the nation.

She had lost her vision. She had lost her hope. She had lost her liberty. Perhaps the thought may occur to us.

Isn't that just like ourselves? Oh, Britain never was perfect. We know that. And yet, Britain was a nation.

A nation known in the world for the fear of God. A nation whose public opinion was, to a large extent, molded upon the word of God. Whose legislation was attempted at least to be based upon the law of God.

[6 : 25] There was a national consciousness. Molded partly consciously, partly unconsciously. By familiarity with God's word.

A nation that was honored to lead the nations of the world in social reform. And especially, in the spreading of the gospel throughout the world.

No nation was so honored as our nation in that way. What do we see today? A nation shorn of its strength.

A nation that no longer enjoys the respect of the nations. A nation that once did. A nation that has lost its faith. Lost its vision.

Lost its way. The church fragmented. And the fragments largely shapeless and useless.

[7 : 25] And we say there's nothing we can do about it. Things have gone too far and we just close our eyes. Well that's what Ezekiel was just not allowed to do.

He wasn't allowed to close his eyes. He wasn't allowed to wallow in melancholy. He was arrested. He was made to think.

He was asked a question. And to answer it without the dope of wishful thinking. Can nothing be done? Is the situation, is the situation really as hopeless as it seems?

Or we can personalize it. For a moment. What about ourselves as individuals?

Is there anyone here feeling that this vision of Ezekiel just described him or her? Or perhaps once we were touched by the gospel.

[8 : 27] The world to come was real to our minds. The sight of Christ crucified moved our hearts. The message of forgiveness of sins and new life stirred our souls.

The sight of people going to the Lord's people filled us with a longing that we might be among them. But that's all a thing of the past. So I don't know if it describes anyone here.

But I know there are many people in the world like that. There was once great hope for them. But that hope has died away.

And even the very thought of such things seems to have died within their own hearts. The chill of the world has petrified the appeal of the gospel.

Their life has been blighted by a hard frost. So they've become impervious to every appeal. And it's long since they've had any desire after heaven or fear of hell.

[9 : 29] Long since the story of Jesus and his love was anything more to them than an idle tale. And yet perhaps now and again they may have a wistful recollection of the past.

Well if that is so, if that describes any of us, wouldn't it be wise to look at this vision of Ezekiel. And to face up to reality.

A valley of dry bones. That's my life. That's the state of my country. What future is there in dry bones? None of course.

But further disintegration. What future is there in a life without Christ? None. The eternal pain and shame and misery.

That's the situation. But is there a way out of the situation? That's the question. That Ezekiel had to face. And so secondly, Ezekiel is presented with a challenge of an arresting quest.

[10 : 40] Don't just look at these bones. Can these bones live? Don't just come together. That would be a miracle of the first order.

And no doubt reconstituted bodies would look better than a scatter of bones. But for all practical purposes, there wouldn't be very much difference. No, can these bones live?

Is it possible that the tide should turn? That the churches in Britain should be filled with new life? Cleansed and invigorated? United not by acts of sin or assembly, but by the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ.

The gospel of redeeming grace proclaimed with power. So we would hear multitudes cry, what must we do to be saved?

Multitudes, as Jeremiah put it, asking the way to Zion with their faces thitherward. Is it possible that a people frozen into insensibility should have the love of God shed abroad in their hearts by his Holy Spirit?

[11 : 48] That one in whom every spiritual impulse and aspiration has been stifled, if indeed it ever existed, should be born again and made a new creation.

Can your faith measure up to that, Ezekiel? That's what God is asking him. And what of your faith and what of my faith?

We who preach the gospel, you who teach in Sabbath schools, you who pray for a revival of God's work, you who long to see the conversion of men and women, boys and girls, well, but what do we expect to see?

How we labor so long and in vain that we just don't expect to see anything. And we go on out of a sense of duty, doing the same thing day in and day out, week in and week out.

And looking for nothing. Well, that wasn't the attitude of Ezekiel. In spite of all the apparent hopelessness of the situation.

[13 : 00] That wasn't Ezekiel's answer to the question. And so in the third place, we notice the response of our humble faith. It can be his bone to live.

And Ezekiel gives the only, really the only possible answer. In all humanity, he says, Lord God, thou knowest.

He cannot say most. He can't do anything about it himself. It's not by might nor by power. The most persuasive preacher on earth can't do anything about it.

So you and I tend to place our faith in men, don't we? Get along some powerful evangelist. Build some well-known name and then things will happen.

Well, of course they may happen. God grants them they will happen. But if we're depending upon any human being, however well-known, however able he may be, then I'm afraid we'll be disappointed.

[14 : 12] We're perhaps concerned for the spiritual condition of our friend. Perhaps he himself is anxious for his own spiritual condition. We may have no longer hear this man or that. So many have been saved under his ministry.

Well, again, we don't know what may happen by the grace of God. And we thank God that there are those who have been mightily used of God in the salvation of souls.

And it's only natural that we should hope that others whom we bring to hear them will have the same experience. I say that's only natural. But the point is this, that if we are trusting in any man, any human being, whosoever it may be, then we needn't wonder if we're disappointed.

No, not even Ezekiel could do anything about it. And yet he was not driven to hopelessness and helplessness despair. Can these bones live?

Of course the obvious answer is no. No. Ezekiel's answer is, Lord God, thou know it. He's not going to answer a glib yes.

[15 : 27] But neither is he to abandon hope and say an emphatic no. Ezekiel is not going to limit the power of God.

He's not going to commit the blasphemy of saying, can God? The question still remains, is God willing? Is God willing?

And of course we can't answer that question. We can't enter into the secrets of God. But at least we can consider some facts that may encourage us.

The first fact is this, that Christ is not dead. Christ was dead, but he is alive forevermore, and all authority in heaven and in earth is committed to him.

And the work is his work. And God will not suffer that work to fail. He will see of the travel of his soul and be satisfied. The second fact is this, that the Holy Spirit has not retired.

[16 : 34] He is still at work in the world. Oh yes, even in this country, here and there, we see the work of the Holy Spirit going on. And in other parts of the world, to a very much greater extent, thank God, we see that the Holy Spirit is working.

And many are being turned out of darkness into light. And there are places in which the Christian church is growing by leaps and bounds in this generation. And then once again, we can derive hope as we think of the past.

Oh God, we have heard without ears our fathers have told us what works thou hast done in their days, even in the days of old. Thou art thou God that do us great wonders.

And we read the work of God in our own country, yes, and in this corner of our own country. And the mighty working of God's Holy Spirit in days gone by in these parts.

Are these days past, never to return? Is the Lord's hand shortened that it cannot save?

[17 : 47] And then once again, we have promises to encourage us. The wilderness and the toiletry place shall be glad for them.

The desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose. You know, there's a very lovely description of God's work in Psalm 100, in Psalm 147, Psalm 147, He gave us snow like wool, He scatters the whole frost like ashes, He casteth forth His ice like morsel, Who can stand before His cold?

He sendeth out His word and melts with them, He callseth the wind to blow and the waters flow. Yes, God is in control over all.

And what God does in nature, when the warmth of spring blows upon the frozen earth and renews the whole face of the world, that that same God can do and does do in the realm of grace.

But remember, God must that. it's His work. Ezekiel can do nothing. Well, nothing at least but one thing.

[19 : 21] And that is, He can trust and obey. That looks like two things, but actually they're inseparably linked into one.

Trust and obedience must go together. And in the realm of obedience, you notice that there were two things that God told him to do. First of all, He told him to preach.

Prophecy. Oh, ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. No wonder the world laughs. No wonder the world talks about the foolishness of preaching.

Imagine talking to dry bones. Is there any hope for the spiritual faculties appear to be non-existent? And yet, are dry bones really any worse than dead bodies?

Because the fact remains that they're all dead. The cold, the hard, the cynical man, oh yes, we admit, he's spiritually dead.

[20 : 29] But the warm-hearted, impressionable person, without Christ, he's dead as well. The degraded and the depraved outcast from society, well, you're right, he's dead, yes, we admit that.

But the respectable, respected citizen, again, without Christ, he also is dead. And God still uses the preaching of the word to raise the dead.

And remember, the preaching doesn't need to be from a pulpit. You remember Philip, the deacon and evangelist, preached unable and most effective service to one man sitting in a chariot on the Gaza Strip.

God has worked for us. Whoever we are, God can use any one of us as his instrument in witnessing to others about Jesus Christ. The other thing is he can pray.

Preaching is for ministers, is it? Well, as we saw, not exclusively so. But at any rate, there's one thing that every Christian can do and is called upon to do, and that is pray.

[21 : 50] nothing can happen unless the Spirit of God works. And here in this chapter we have, I think, the only prayer to the Holy Spirit recorded in Scripture.

you have it in verse 9, and remember that in the Hebrew language which just was first written, the same word, the same word serves for breath and wind and spirit.

And so you might render the prayer, come from the four winds, O Spirit, and breathe upon these flames that they may live.

Now friend, do you pray? Do I pray? Oh, we engage in prayer, no doubt. But how much do we pray? How perseveringly do we pray?

How definitely do we pray? Do we pray for definite people, for definite things? Do we pray for our own congregation? Do we pray for the preacher as he prepares his sermon for the following Sabbath?

[23 : 08] Do we pray for him even as we sit in the church as he delivers the sermon? Do we pray for those who listen? Do we pray for ourselves first and foremost?

For the work that we ourselves may hear a word from the Lord. Do we pray for the other hearers and all their different circumstances? Some of their circumstances may be known to us, most of them are not known to us, but they're all known to God.

The saved and the unsaved, the tried and the tempted, the impressionable and the estimatingly indifferent, the sorrowful, the perplexed, whatever be their need.

Pray that a word may be given to the preacher of the gospel that will minister to the exact need of those who hear and that that word may be brought home by the power of that same Holy Spirit.

And then the climax of it all, we have finally the revelation of a divine power. Can these bones live? [24 : 23] Lord God, thou knowest. And God gives his answer to the prophet's preaching and his prayer and the answer falls into three phases and we'll just look at them for a moment one by one.

The first we may call agitation. There was a noise and a shaking. Oh, it's a good thing to see trembling under the word of God and it's often the beginning of greater things.

Do you remember as Peter spoke on the day of Pentecost the people were pricked to their hearts. They cried, Men and brethren, what must we do? And there were three thousand converted on that one day.

But mere trembling isn't enough. An electric shock can make bones tremble. Felix trembled as Paul spoke to him of righteousness and temperance and judgment to come.

Did you remember he pigeonholed the whole matter in the back room of his mind and from there so far as we know it never emerged. Perhaps you once trembled under the word of God, under the preaching of the majesty of the law, under the preaching of the terrors of God's judgment, and you were afraid and you resolved that you would think about it, but you put it off, you filed it for future reference, you slept on it and then forgot.

[25 : 59] Is that the case with anyone here? Oh, trembling is not enough. Then there's a second phase. integration. You might call it integration.

The bones came together. Our things are beginning to happen now. It's amazing, isn't it? It's good to see some results from the preaching of the gospel.

If only the churches were fooled again, if only the membership was united on a scriptural basis or stage, if only the worship was conducted in a in orderly scriptural fashion, oh yes, it would be a wonderful thing.

And yet you can have all that. And the most important factor of all would still be missing. It's put very succinctly and very solemnly in this very chapter.

Bones came together and bones to his bones and skin came up upon them, but there was no breath, there was no life. You can have reformation, you can have a character above reproach.

[27 : 07] You may be diligent, regular, reverent in public worship, and yet spiritually dead. Do we want to see a full church or a living church?

Of course, we would like to see both, but which is the more important to us? Do we want to see new life in Christ, or are we content just to go through the old form of round?

Outward religion can be satisfying. It can cost very little, and it will avail nothing. Lord, Lord, have you been diligent in attendance at thy house, coming to every service, coming to prayer meetings, engaging in family worship?

Oh, you remember our Lord said something more searching than that. He spoke of people who would say, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name, and in thy name have cast out devils, and in thy name have done many marvelous works.

And the noticeable thing is that our Lord didn't deny their claim. At the same time he says to them, then will I profess unto them, I never knew you, depart from me, ye that work in equity.

[28 : 31] Yes, there must be something more. What is still lacking? Agitation, integration. But finally, and all important, there's animation.

The breath came into them, and they lived, and they stood on their feet, an exceeding great army. Human power can produce emotion, can produce organization, can produce reformation, but only the spirit of God can make dry bones live.

But when he works, he can make dry bones live, and when he does, we must, and we will, respond. You see, there are two sides to this work.

On the one hand, there is regeneration, and that is the work, solely the work of God's Holy Spirit, bringing new life to birth.

But regeneration is followed by conversion. They go together, but they're distinct. Conversion is our response, our turning to God.

[29 : 49] That's what it literally is. Turn ye, turn ye, for why will ye die, O house of Israel? Come unto me, all ye that labor and I will give you rest.

You see, in a word, conversion is the outward evidence of the work of the Spirit in our hearts. Well, my friends, will you plead earnestly that this God Spirit will work in you, showing you your needs, revealing Christ to you, because that is his work.

he shall take those things that are mine, that Christ shall show it unto you. That's the only hope for the beginning of a Christian life, the only hope for growth in knowledge and in grace. May the Holy Spirit then show to us Christ crucified. May he show us the meaning of the cross. May he enable us to say he was wounded for my transgression, he was bruised for my iniquity, the chastisement of my peace was upon him and with his stripes I am healed. And then may he enable us to die with him daily unto sin and live for him. As Paul puts it, reckon yourselves dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ. [31 : 16] And then pray that he will do the same in the life of others. And pray that he will work in the church and that he will work in the whole community. And that there may be a widespread returning to God.

You see, no matter how hopeless we may feel the situation, Christ has dealt with the whole situation. He has transformed and can still transform the chief of sinners. The proud, self-righteous Pharisee, and also the poor and degraded outcast, the publicans and the sinners of his own time. The people put a vast difference between these two. The very righteous Pharisees, the utterly death people and sinners. In his sight, they were all one in their need. They were all sinners, and so it is still. The indifference, the gospel hardened, the communities, whole communities, that are making this world their God, rejecting God's moral law, living only for this present world, ignorant of the very name of God, except as a swear word. Will we ever see the tide turn? The situation seems so hopeless. It's not any more hopeless, surely, than the vision that Ezekiel told. [32 : 43] There is nothing too hard for the Lord. Can these bones live? Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst. May we hear him say, I will.

Do we want to see the Spirit of God at work, in quickening and revising? Well, we are told, seek, and ye shall find. Let us ask and say, according to your faith, be it, and to you. Let us pray. O Lord, we bless thee, that thy word is timeless, that the vision that Ezekiel saw can apply to us still, that the transformation that he saw effected can still be wrought, for thine hand is not shortened that it cannot save, thy knee is not heavy that it cannot see. we pray to you, God, to work mightily, work in each of our hearts, work in our congregation, work throughout our land, grant the days of thy power may be seen even in these days of ours. Take us now, we pray, be in safety to our homes and be with us through the coming days, accept of us in Christ. Amen. shall conclude by singing in Psalm number 85, Psalm 85, and we'll sing from verse 6 to the end, the last five psalms of the psalm, the tune St. [34 : 18] Leonard. verse 6 But in thee may thy people joy, wilt thou not us revive, show us thy mercy, Lord, to us to thy salvation give. I'll hear what God the Lord will speak, to his folk he'll speak peace and to his saints, let them not return to foolishness.

psalm 85, verse 6 to the end of the psalm. At in thee thy people joy, wilt thou not as revive, show us thy mercy, Lord, to us to thy salvation gain.

I'll hear what God the Lord will speak, to his folk he'll speak peace unto his sins but let them not return to foolishness.

To them that feel him surely near his salvation, that glory in our glory in our land may have our habitation shall but minded they shall serve for the distress love to Pat towards him to the heinvest who and righteousness put down from heaven high.

If what is good the Lord shall give all and shall yield increase.

[36 : 57] Justice who set us in his death shall go before his face.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all and with all the people of God now and forever. Amen.