

# **Strong at the Broken Places**

## **5. Breathe**

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Over my years as a pastor, I've had the privilege of standing with people in some of the highest moments and lowest moments of their lives.

I love sharing the mountain top moments. For example, weddings—I am still moved at the beginning of the service when the doors at the back of the worship area open; the congregation stands and the bride enters, looking radiant. I sneak a look at the face of the groom, who usually looks amazed. It's a highlight moment the couple will remember for the rest of their lives.

I love stopping in at graduation parties, with everyone celebrating the future lies ahead for the graduate. And it's always a privilege to be involved in the baptism of children, talking with the parents about their future spiritual growth.

I've also stood with people in the dark valleys of life. The first funeral I ever conducted as a 26-year-old pastor was for a one-month-old infant. I remember walking up to the tent covering the grave and seeing a tiny white casket on a stand. What could I possibly say to those parents? As I stood next to that small box with a picture on top, I felt very inadequate.

I've met with people who were devastated because the person who pledged to stay with them for better or worse, in sickness and in health, left them for someone they liked better. Their world is rocked, and their heart is shredded. What to say?

I've tried to encourage people who lost their jobs, people whose children broke their hearts, who have lost any hope for their future. In those crushing moments we need to hang on to this truth: No matter how dark the moment, **God will breathe new life into us if we seek him.**

That is the message of Ezekiel 37. Chapter 37 is the story of what happened at the valley of Dry Bones. It starts with this vision from God:

**Ezekiel 37:1-3** *The hand of the LORD was on 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. <sup>2</sup> He 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. <sup>3</sup> He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know."*

Ezekiel saw a vision of a valley with a massive number of dry bones. The bones were really dry, which means that these people were long gone. God wanted Ezekiel to understand that there were absolutely no signs of life in the valley – it was all dry bones.

So, he asks him: "Ezekiel, can these bones live?" Ezekiel is not sure if the obvious answer is the right one, so he responds, "Only you know, Lord."

*v. 4-5 Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! 5 This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life."*

To prophesy means to speak what the Lord says. God tells Ezekiel to talk to a pile of bones and tell them that God says they are going to live. That's an encouraging message, but Richard Allen Farmer says that if were Ezekiel, he'd want to take a different approach, like...

"God, wouldn't you rather I sing to the bones? Music has a way of stirring the soul. Why don't I sing to the bones?"

"No, Ezekiel, prophesy, speak the word of God to these bones."

"How about if we form a bone reassembly committee?"

"No, speak to the bones."

"How about if I study the bones a little while?"

"No, speak the word to the bones."

"Could I call in some bone consultants to give us ideas on what to do with them?"

"No, speak God's word to the bones," God says to Ezekiel.

God wants Ezekiel to tell the bones: *God says, I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.* The Lord will make breath enter the bones.

The Hebrew word for "Breath" is "Ruach" which is also the Hebrew word for "Spirit." That's the word used in Genesis 1:2 when it says, "Spirit of God was hovering above the waters" – the *ruach* was hovering.

Genesis 2:7 says that God formed Adam, then put breath -- *ruach* – in him and he came to life. God is saying that he will give the bones breath – the Spirit – and the Spirit will give life to the bones.

*7 So 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. 8 I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them, and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.*

The bones are becoming bodies – but they still aren't alive because there is still no breath in them. They are looking good, but they're not alive. A person can look good on the outside, yet not have any life spiritually. And a church can look impressive but have no spiritual life.

But God is not done. He gives Ezekiel another message to deliver. This time Ezekiel isn't supposed to speak to the bones, he is supposed to speak to the breath – inviting the spirit to come.

*9 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" 10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.*

The Spirit came and brought life!

That's an interesting vision, but what does it mean? Why did God show it to Ezekiel? In verse 11, God tells Ezekiel why he saw this vision.

*Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.'*

In Ezekiel's time, the people of Israel felt like a pile of dry bones. They had lost all hope for the future. They were living as captives of the pagan Babylonians because they

wouldn't stop worshipping idols. As exiles in a pagan land, their relationship with God was dead. Before they were God's chosen people, now they felt like God's rejected people.

Their hope for their kids' future were dead. Their ability to determine their own future was dead. The temple was destroyed and their connection with God was dead.  
B. But God was not going to let them stay dead.

**Ezekiel 37:12-14** *Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: 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. <sup>13</sup> Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. <sup>14</sup> I 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.'*

And history shows, that's just what happened. After 70 years the Jews were allowed to return home. And they never worshipped idols again after that. There's a pattern going on throughout this story; it goes like this: God tells Ezekiel what to speak, Ezekiel speaks God's words, the Spirit gives life.

God tells Ezekiel what he's going to do: give life to the dead, and he involves Ezekiel in the process. God could make the bones lives himself, but he chooses to have Ezekiel play a key part in the process: Ezekiel's role is to speak God's words. Until he does that, nothing happens.

And here is the message that God repeats three times:

- (v. 5) "I will put my breath -- *ruach* -- spirit -- in you and you will come to life."
- (v.6) "I will put my breath in you, and you will come to life"
- (v. 14) "I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live"

That's God's intent: to bring life. And that's what Ezekiel speaks. The reason this story is in the Bible is because God wants to tell you and me that same message: "I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live."

What's dead in your life today?

- Maybe it's your marriage that feels dead and dry as bones.
- Or maybe your plans for the future have crumbled into a dead heap.
- Or maybe you are feeling emotionally dead and depressed
- Maybe you are spiritually dry; God seems remote, and nothing stirs your soul
- Maybe your social life is dead: you feel alone and don't know how to connect with other people.

I don't know what impossible situation you might be facing, but here is what God says: "I will put my Spirit in you, and you will come to life." And it will happen the same way it did in Ezekiel 37: God will prompt, someone will speak what God says, and the Spirit will

give life. In fact, if you are a follower of Jesus, God has already put his Spirit in you and started to bring you to life.

**Colossians 2:13** *When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ.*

God took the initiative and sent Jesus, someone shared the message of the Gospel with you, and when you responded the Spirit entered you and made you spiritually alive. Even so, maybe you have felt spiritually dry, and God seems remote. You don't have to stay that way. Speak the word of the Lord to your Spirit: "I will put my Spirit in you, and you will come to life."

Let's prophesy to our spirits out loud together: *"I will put my Spirit in you, and you will come to life."*

Some of us today feel hopeless and think it would be easier to give up. In Communist Russia Alexander spent years in a Siberian prison as a political prisoner. At one point he was so discouraged that he decided to give up and die. His plan was to stop working when out in the field; to just lean on his shovel and wait for the guards to come and beat him to death. But when he stopped, another prisoner reached over with his shovel and quickly drew a cross at his feet, then erased it before a guard could see it. Solzhenitsyn didn't give up because a fellow believer cared enough to speak the word of the Lord, and Alexander lived. You may not be a political prisoner, but maybe you are a prisoner of depression or anxiety. That's not God's plan for you.

Prophesy – speak to your soul and tell it that God will put his Spirit in you, and you will come to life." Let's tell our soul that aloud all together: *"I will put my Spirit in you, and you will come to life."* Let's say that again; declare the word of the Lord to our emotions: *"I will put my Spirit in you, and you will come to life."*

It might take some time. Sometimes there will be some rattling as the bones come together... It's not always going to be instant or easy. You may have to work through relationship problems – it's just a rattle. You may have to pray through delay – it's just a rattle. You may have to grow and display faith. But stay steadfast. Don't let a little rattling alarm you, it's all part of the process of coming to life.

Some of us may feel disconnected from other people. We don't have anyone in our lives we can confide in – who cares for what's happening. Our friendships are a pile of old bones. Dry – no life. Let's speak the word of the Lord to our friendships: *"I will put my Spirit in you, and you will come to life."* Declare it.

This is not wishful thinking – the Lord already spoke it to us. You might think it is impossible to overcome your addiction – but that's OK. God does impossible.

God made sure Ezekiel saw that the dry bones were really dead. There was absolutely no life in them – all the life is in God. He says, “I will put my Spirit in you, and you will come to life.” God will intervene. There is nothing that is impossible with God.

Let’s speak the word of the Lord to ourselves: *“I will put my Spirit in you, and you will come to life.”*

What is dead in your life right now? Let’s take just a moment to silently ask what is dead that the Lord wants to give life. “Lord, in this moment of silence I ask you speak to your people and show them what you want to revive.

What did God reveal to you? OK, you know what to say, let’s all speak to our own pile of dry bones and declare the word of the Lord. *“I will put my Spirit in you, and you will come to life.”*

And when the time comes that we die the Lord says: *“you will come to life.”* We will live with him forever. He gives life.

In verse 10 we’re told that the *“breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.”* When we are brought to life by the Spirit, God makes us a vast army. That army is called The Church. But sometimes the army loses focus and strength, and it needs to be revived.

I was at a prayer gathering in Florida when Rini Hernandez told the story about how the Lord revived his church. Some years ago, the communist government of Cuba was cracking down on the church.

Rini was a young man when he decided to go to seminary to become a pastor. His father pulled him aside and asked him if he was sure he was ready to pay the price for that. Rini said he was. As he finished his seminary degree, Rini was arrested and spent two years in jail for his faith. When he got out, he became pastor of one of the main churches of Havana. At one time it had over 1,000 people in it, but the government persecution had reduced the number down to less than 100.

The people who were left were discouraged and didn’t know what to do. So Rini told them, “Look, in our own power nothing will happen. The only thing that can keep our church from dying is the power of God.” They were a pile of dry bones. They turned to prayer. They spoke to the Spirit. They got together to pray, nothing else.

They cried out to God for help and power. And then miraculous things started to happen. Unexplainable things. The Spirit of God touched lives and transformed them. And those transformed people brought hope to others, who came to Christ. Revival broke out.

To be revived means to be brought back to life again. That's what happened at Rini's church. And the church grew again – back to over 1,000 people before persecution drove Rini to leave the country.

Friends, our church is not at the point of closing. There is life here. But we need more life so that we can give it away to our community. We also need revival. We can't get complacent and miss out on what God wants to do.

God is calling us to an exciting future, and we will be able to see him work in new ways like never before. But not on our own power – we need the breath of God. Will you pray with me? Will you speak to the breath – to the Spirit – and say, "Come breath – come Holy Spirit – come that we might live."