

Through the Bible at 30,000 Feet
Ezekiel | *The Story of These Bones*
 February 27, 2022 @ North Center

Today, we are going to be in the book of the prophet Ezekiel, and I want to begin by looking at this graphic scene in **chapter 37** where Ezekiel sees a valley full of dry bones.

This past week, as I was driving my son **Troy** home from school, he asked me what I am preaching on this Sunday. I said, “*I’m preaching on the prophet Ezekiel.*” And he said, “*I know Ezekiel. He was the prophet who saw the valley full of skeletons.*”

I remember watching a **war movie** when I was in high school (one that I’m quite sure my parents didn’t know I was watching). It was based on a true story, and there’s a scene where the main character falls into a trench. And as he gets up, he sees that he’s surrounded by what must be hundreds of skeletons. *It’s an image that you don’t quickly forget!*

And it’s an image that Ezekiel would not quickly forget!

READ **Ezekiel 37:1–3**

This morning, I want to look at the big picture of Ezekiel by looking at the story of this valley full of dry bones.

- What happened? What’s the story behind these dry bones?
- What’s the meaning of this horrific sight?
- And what about God’s question, “*Can these bones live?*”

PRAY

The story behind these dry bones begins in **Ezekiel 16** where God gives Ezekiel a picture of how His relationship with His people began.

READ **Ezekiel 16:1–6, 9–14**

This is a graphic picture of what God’s redeeming love for His people looks like.

- He *saw* us when we were rejected and forgotten by the world.
- He had *compassion* on us when they rest of the world did not.
- He *rescued* us when we had absolutely no strength to rescue ourselves.
- When we had no hope, He called us to *find life* in Him.
- He made us *thrive*. He *washed* us. He *clothed* us. I *adorned* us in the garments of royalty.
- And He made us *perfect through His splendor*.

This is what it means to be a child of God!

- I’m not a child of God because I’m a good person.
- I’m not a child of God because of anything I have ever done for God.
- I am a child of God because He had compassion on my helpless, hopeless heart and because He gave me life in Him.

I'm a child of God because He *"is able to save and deliver and heal and restore anything that He wants to."*¹

That's how our story begins. It begins with God.
But now look at how this beautiful, precious child responds?

READ **Ezekiel 16:15**

She gives herself away. She turns her back on the One who rescued her (on the One who gave her life) and gives her heart to *"everyone passing by who would have it."*

And that's also our story. We sing about it all the time:

"Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love."

That's been the story of God's people from the very beginning. We have now looked at 25 books in the Bible together, and one of the major themes that **we have seen** over and over again is that God's people are *"prone to wander"*. They are constantly rejecting Him.²

We have also seen how God has given them every opportunity to repent. He's given them *rescuers* like Joseph & Moses. He's given them *warriors* like Joshua & Samson. He's given them *prophets* like Samuel. He's given them *kings* like David & Solomon. He's given them *judges* like Deborah and Gideon. He's given them *prophets* like Isaiah & Jeremiah. He's given them *laws*. He's performed *miracles*. He's provided *victories*. He has given them *warning* after *warning* ... but their hearts have continued to grow harder and harder towards God.

After giving a catalogue her wickedness in Ezekiel, God says (**16:30**), *"How degenerate is your heart...seeing you do all these things, the deeds of a brazen harlot."*

In other words, their hearts had become completely hardened against their God. They had rejected *God*. They had rejected His *goodness*. They had rejected His *warnings*. They had rejected His *Word*. And so Ezekiel was sent – not to warn the people (God was done warning them) – Ezekiel was sent to proclaim God's message in the midst of judgment.

READ **Ezekiel 1:1**

ISAIAH	God's messenger before God's people were taken captive into Babylon.
JEREMIAH	God's messenger while God's people were being captured by Babylon.
EZEKIEL	God's messenger after God's people had been taken captive into Babylon.

¹ "Rattle" by Elevation Worship.

² They were supposed to be a light to the nations around them, but they ended up looking exactly like everybody else. They joined the world in their idolatry. They joined the world in the sexuality. They joined the world in their luxury. They joined the world in their arrogance. They joined the world in the pleasures of sin. How does this rejection make God feel? In **Ezekiel 6:9** it says that God *"was crushed by their adulterous heart."* There are a lot of words in Ezekiel that describe how God feels about the rejection of His people: fury (13:13; 16:42), anger (13:13; 16:42), wrath (13:15), jealousy (16:38, 42), agitation (16:43).

Ezekiel's **NAME** means "*Strengthened by God*", and he was going to need that strength because the message God gave Ezekiel to preach to His people in Babylon was going to be wildly unpopular.

The people wanted to hear happy messages...like:

- *Jerusalem has been spared...*
- *The King of Babylon is going to let everybody go back home...*
- *God is going to destroy Babylon, and set His people free...*

These were the kinds of happy messages that the false prophets had been preaching for years.³

- *Relax, God won't let Jerusalem fall*
- *Relax, God won't let the Temple be destroyed*
- *Relax, God won't let His people be taken into captivity*

In **Ezekiel 13:10**, God talks about the false prophets who have "*seduced My people, saying 'Peace!' when there is no peace.*"

Ezekiel had a different message. His message was about **God's judgment** for their sinful, rebellious, unrepentant hearts, and it was not popular.

READ Ezekiel 2:3, 7

APPLICATION:

If you live your life as a Christian according to the Word of God (like Ezekiel did), there is a very good chance that you will **not** be very popular in the eyes of the world, and you need to decide ahead of time whose opinion of you matters more: the people around you or God's.

- This isn't just something that I struggled with as a teenager...
- It's something that I still struggle with today:
 - I want my kids to think that their dad is cool.
 - I want my church family to think highly of their pastor.
 - I want my friends to have happy feelings when they think about me.
 - I want the people I work with to be excited when I walk through the door.

I want people around me to like what I say and to like what I do... but what I have found (*as a husband and a dad and a son and a pastor and a friend*) is that Christians must often make a choice between popularity & obedience.⁴

For example: there are certain video games that my children are never going to get to play while they are growing up in my house. And there are certain clothes that they are never going to wear while they are growing up in my house.

³ Example: **Ezekiel 13**.

⁴ **ILL.** As a dad, I am forced to choose between his momentary approval rating of me and God's call on my life to raise my son in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Popularity or obedience.

And there are certain movies or things on television that they are never going to get to watch (*like the Super Bowl Halftime show*) while they are growing up in my house.

- Now, do those decisions make me a popular dad with my boys in the moment? Nope! 😊
- But I know that one day, I am going to stand before my God and give an account of how I raised my children, and as much as I care about my children's opinion of me, I care about God's opinion more.⁵

Ezekiel's message was going to be very unpopular, but God was going to give him the strength he needed.

READ EZEKIEL 3:4, 7-9

Ezekiel's ministry begins with a vision of God's glory in Babylon. He sees this bizarre vision of:

- four living creatures, each with four faces and four wings (1:5-6)
- they are carrying this awesome platform with a throne (1:22-26)
- sitting on this throne was the appearance of a glorious person (1:26-28)

In **1:28** Ezekiel describes this vision as "*the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.*"

- Why is it significant that Ezekiel is seeing a vision of the glory of God in Babylon?
- Because it means that the glory of God had departed from Jerusalem.⁶
 - In **Exodus 33**, we read that the physical presence of God's glory is what made His people distinct from all the peoples on the earth. The physical manifestation of God's glory had dwelt above the ark of the covenant which was first in the Tabernacle and then in the Temple,⁷ but now Ezekiel is seeing it in Babylon!

Why is God's glory leaving Jerusalem?

Because God's people had utterly rejected Him, and so He was now finally given them what He promised in the covenant that He made with them.⁸

The next 30 chapters deal primarily with God's judgments against His people and against the nations surrounding His people.

What makes Ezekiel's book so unique is that God doesn't just give him wild visions and difficult messages, but He also gives Ezekiel bizarre dramas that he is supposed to perform in front of the people to give them a visual of God's judgment.⁹

⁵ See also **Ezekiel 3:16-21**.

⁶ In **chapter 10-11**, Ezekiel is given a vision of the glory of God leaving Jerusalem.

⁷ E.g., Ex 25:22; 2 Kings 19:15; Isa 37:16.

⁸ E.g., Deut 30:15-20.

⁹ **ILL.** How many of you had a mom who, when she was upset, would clap her hands while she was talking in order to get your attention (e.g., "*I - asked - you - if - you - cleaned - your - room*"). The words together with the actions emphasize the message.

For example, he is commanded to:

- Lay on his left side for 390 days (which was meant to remind God’s people of the 390 years that the Northern Kingdom of Israel had utterly rejected God) and then he was supposed to lay on his right side for another 40 days (which was meant to symbolize the 40 years the Southern Kingdom of Judah had rejected God). So Ezekiel lays on his side for a total of 430 days. **(4:4–8)**
 - That means, if God commanded you to do this, and you started today...you wouldn’t finish until May 3 of next year.

- Q. What are the people supposed to think as they see this prophet lying on his side day after day after day?
- A. They are supposed to think, “*Man, we have rebelled against God for a really long time.*”

Q. Maybe you’re wondering what Ezekiel is going to eat during this 430-day period?

- A. He’s going to eat the bread that he made ahead of time. “*Well, that’s not so bad,*” you think! It’s not just any bread. It’s bread that he is commanded to cook over a pile of cow poop **(4:15)**.
- This is supposed to be picture of how desperate the days would be for God’s people in the near future. *Their situation would become so bad* that they would end up eating things a whole lot worse than bread made over cow dung.¹⁰

- He was told to shave his head and his beard and then burn a third of the hair, cut up another third, and scatter the other third in the wind **(5:1–2)**.
 - This was going to be a picture of how *God’s people would be progressively destroyed* during the ongoing destruction of Jerusalem.

- Perhaps the hardest drama that Ezekiel was given was the one with the death of his wife **(24:15–27)**. God refers to Ezekiel’s wife as “the desire of Ezekiel’s eyes”, and God took her away.
 - This was meant to show God’s people *what they too were going to lose because of their rebellion*. The most valuable thing in their life was the glory of God in the Temple of Jerusalem, and God was taking it away. His glory had left, and the Temple would be destroyed.

Their sin had cost them everything. Their sin had cost them everything.

That’s the story of these bones – here in **Ezekiel 37**.

Many years later, in his letter to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul said, “*The wages of sin is death*” **(Rom 6:23)**.¹¹

¹⁰ I.e., **Ezek 5:10**.

¹¹ Similarly, in his letter to the Christians scattered across the globe, James wrote that “*sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death*” **(James 1:15)**.

Ezekiel is given a vision of valley full of dry bones as a picture of the devastation of sin.

“*The wages of sin is death.*” It is.

- Brother or sister, whatever sin you are entertaining in your heart right now...there is only one place it leads. Death. It leads to a valley of bones.
- Whatever sin you are holding onto this morning (lust, bitterness, envy, adultery, pornography, greed, pride, selfishness...) it's not worth it. It's just going to eat away at your heart and eat away at your mind and eat away at your soul until, one day, your faith is pile of dry bones in a valley of dry bones.

The wages of sin is death... **but** the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

That's how that verse ends, and (almost unbelievably) that's how the book of Ezekiel ends.

- Even in the midst of judgment in Babylon, God is not done with His people.
- Even when God's people have become the picture of a valley of dry bones, God isn't done!

Sometimes, this world can feel like a really hopeless place...

- Whether you're looking at the devastation in Ukraine
- Or tracking the death toll of natural disasters (like the mudslides in Brazil)¹²
- Or the continuing global pandemic
- Or maybe the feeling of hopelessness hits even closer to home: with your children, or your marriage
- Or maybe its an overwhelming sense of shame at your failure to live the way you know God is calling you to live.

If there was ever a picture of utter hopelessness, Ezekiel is looking at it!

And as he stands, staring out across a valley of very dry bones, God asks Him an incomprehensible question: “*Can these bones live?*” (**Ezekiel 37:3**).

And the answer is: “They can!”

READ Ezekiel 37:4–14

And that's how this book ends.

- It goes from total devastation: God's glory leaving the temple; the people living as exiles in Babylon; the Temple destroyed; and God's people feeling utterly hopeless. **Dry Bones.**
- And it ends with a vision of a New Covenant that would never be broken; a New Temple that would never be destroyed; a New King that would never leave the throne; a New Shepherd that would never deceive His sheep; and a source of life that comes from the presence of God and spreads throughout the entire world.

The story of these bones is the story of the Gospel. It's the story of our sin & death and of our new life in Christ because of the powerful, life-giving, hope-restoring grace of God.

¹² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/25/brazil-death-toll-from-landslides-flooding-rises-to-217>