

Life Has the Last Word

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1 Peter 1: 3-12

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angles long to look!

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord, God to these bones; I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live" I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God; I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord have spoken and will act," says the Lord.

1 Peter 1: 3-12. This is a very complex passage. As we have it in the RSV, it is seven sentences, but the original Greek is a single sentence --from verse 3-12. Many modern translations break it into even smaller sentences--Today's English, 15, far more in accord with today's English usage, which frowns on long, complicated sentence structure.

But something of the exuberance of the original is gone when the sentences are shortened. It is as though the author had news that was so exciting, so overwhelming, that it all had to be blurted out at once, leaving the teller breathless by the end of the sentence.

I shall read the passage from the New King James Version, simply because it breaks it even less than the others, giving us five sentences:

³ Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, ⁵ who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ that the genuineness of your faith, *being* much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, ⁸ whom having not

seen you love. Though now you do not see *Him*, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,⁹ receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of *your* souls.

¹⁰Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace *that would come* to you,¹¹ searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.¹²To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things which angels desire to look into.

What a joyful passage! No wonder it is read in the season immediately after Easter Sunday in many lectionaries! Everything in heaven and on earth is included. It is one long statement of thanksgiving for a salvation so great that it overwhelms us when we try to describe it.

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

The hand of the LORD came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it *was* full of bones.² Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, *there were* very many in the open valley; and indeed *they were* very dry.³ And He said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

So I answered, “O Lord GOD, You know.”

⁴Again He said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!’⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: “Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live.⁶ I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I *am* the LORD.”

⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone.⁸ Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but *there was* no breath in them.

⁹Also He said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.”¹⁰ So I prophesied as He commanded

me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army.

¹¹ Then He said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, ‘Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!’ ¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel.

At first sight, the mood of the text from Ezekiel is very different. The Spirit of the Lord sets Ezekiel “*down* in the midst of the valley.” In previous visions, Ezekiel has been taken up to Mt. Zion. In chapter 35, he is told to prophesy against Mt. Se’ir, and in chapter 36 he is commanded to prophesy “to the mountains of Israel.” But now he is brought down to “the valley.” The text does not tell us what “valley” this is. From other references in the same book, it is surmised that Ezekiel is referring to the lower sections of the Tigris— Euphrates valley.

In any case, later commentary has consecrated the name of this particular setting as “the valley of dry bones.” And that is as it should be, for no matter whether Ezekiel is speaking of a specific geographic setting, or just of a valley in his vision, its dominant feature is that it was full of bones, and that they are covered with bones was extensive: “And he led me round among them; and behold, there were very many upon the valley; and, they were very dry.”

Apparently, the imagery is either that of an old battlefield or of a large caravan in the desert that has been covered by a sandstorm and that the wind uncovers years later, showing nothing but dried out bones and the decayed remnants of past wealth.

In any case, the point is clear. There is no reason for hope. Everything is dead and desiccated. The situation is hopeless, the Spirit God even drives home the point by asking the prophet, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

Given the situation of the prophet and his people, such a feeling of gloom was amply justified. In the year 597 B.C., a large number of Jews, Ezekiel among them, had been forcibly taken off to Babylon to live as exiles. Ezekiel's own life was shattered. He belonged to the priestly caste, and should have been a priest, except that when he became thirty years old, the age at which he should have become a priest, he was in exile hundreds of miles away from Babylon. The people were dejected, torn away from the land they considered home, and made to serve the mighty Emperor Nebuchadrezzar. Their mood is poignantly described in Psalm 137:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of
How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy."

Or, as our text in Ezekiel says, the exiles are devastated to the point that they say "our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off."

Certainly, the setting of this text is not a joyful one, nor one that would have given any of us a basis for hope.

Yet, if we stop to think about it, this was not so different from the setting. . .

Likewise, as we continue reading the text in Ezekiel, we find that it is a text of joy and hope. It would be surprising joy and hope were it not that we have heard the story so many times that we have lost the sense of its unexpected ending.

God says to Ezekiel: “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.”

Now that's strange. If the bones are dead, how can they hear? You go out talking to dead bones, and if you are not a prince of Denmark in a Shakespearean tragedy, you are just plain crazy. But that is precisely what God commands Ezekiel to do: “Say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.”

The reason is that the Word of the Lord is not just empty sound. We in the twentieth century have lost much of the sense of the power of words. We tend to think that words are no more than sounds by which we communicate ideas --or, as the medieval skeptic would say, words are no more than the wind of the voice. But it is not so in Scripture. Most especially, it is not so with the Word of God. In Scripture, when God speaks, that which God pronounces comes to be.

Referring again to the Genesis stories, which this text in Ezekiel so closely parallels, God said, “let there be light,” and there was light. And God said, “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters,” and it was so. And God said, “Let the waters under the firmament be gathered together,” and it was so. And God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation,” and it was so. And God said, “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens,” and it was so. And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures,” and it was so. And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures,” and it was so. And God said, “Let us make humans in our image, after our likeness,” and it was so. What God speaks, God creates. Or, as we read in the prophet Isaiah, “So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (55: 11).

Now, in this valley of dry bones, where there seems to be no reason for hope, God commands the prophet to speak to the bones. But he is to speak not just any word. He is to speak the word of God. And this is to be a word of re-creation: “Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.” And, as in the Genesis stories, it was so: “And as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And as I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them.” In short, God said, “let there be”. . . and it was so.

Still, as in the Genesis story, these bones in the shape of people were not people. They were not alive. Or, as the prophet says, “there was no breath in them.” You will recall that in Genesis 2 we are told that “the Lord God formed the human creature of dust from the ground, and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being.”

As in the two-stage story in Genesis, where God forms a body and then breathes life into it, our text also includes a second stage. In verses 9 to 10, the prophet is told to speak the word of God again, this time commanding the breath (which in Hebrew is the same word as wind and as spirit) to come into the reconstituted bodies and make them live. And it was so. “The breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host.”

Thus, what begins as a text of gloom and hopelessness ends as a text of unbelievable and unexpected hope: to the downcast and downtrodden exiled, hopeless people, that God sends the message of the dry bones come to life: “Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel. . And you shall live, and I will place you in your own land; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it.” In other words, as in the creation story, God has said it will be so, and it will be so.