

## Introduction: National Crisis

The prophet Ezekiel had the unenviable challenge of ministering to Israel during the darkest days of her history. Because of persistent idolatry, God sent her into Babylonian captivity under Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. Such captivities were brutal, the epitome of “man’s inhumanity to man.” They included such things as razing the land (scorched earth), genocide, and the capture and enslavement of Israel’s best and brightest citizens. In this context of national despair, Ezekiel, himself an exile, sees an unusual vision. We read about it in the biblical book that bears his name, Ezekiel 37:1-3 :

***1 The hand of the LORD was upon 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. 2 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.***

## The Vision

The Spirit of God whisks Ezekiel into a valley (near Tel-Abib). It is the same valley where he first received word of his people’s impending doom (3:22). Here, the prophet sees sights that are horrifically “Halloweenish,” i.e., acres upon acres of dry and brittle bones littering the valley floor. On one hand, these are the skeletal remains of the Israelites who died because of the rampant pestilence, widespread famine, and sharp sword of their Babylonian capturers. On the other, they represent Israel’s spiritual death and decay.

## About Bones

Scripturally speaking, “bones” are symbolic of one’s spiritual health. When a person is living right with God his/her bones are said to be strong and healthy. Listen to the promise of Isaiah 58:11 :

***The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.***

## Spiritual Osteoporosis

However, when a person lives in the chronic state of sin and unbelief s/he develops spiritual osteoporosis. After his torrid affair with Bathsheba, David cried out in Psalm 38:3:

***There is no health in my bones because of my sin.***

The Proverb writer adds (17:22)

***A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.***

Dubbed the “Great Physician,” Jesus adroitly diagnosed the advanced spiritual osteoporosis of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:27:

***Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.***

The arid and broken bones Ezekiel sees lying exposed in the valley represent a nation that has forsaken God. Because she has forgotten God, her spiritual health has deteriorated. Sadly, the nation is in the last stages of spiritual decay.

### **Can These Bones Live Again?**

Amid such doom and gloom, God asks Ezekiel a vision question: “Can these bones live” (v3). Imagine the Lord whisking you over to our cemetery and asking you that. You’re staring at hundreds of graves, and he asks if you think those engraved people can re-animate, not as in the zombie apocalypse, but in terms of resurrection. “Only you know Lord” is Ezekiel’s reply. His answer implies that nothing in the human experience, or imagination, could ever fathom dry and dusty bones reassembling and coming back to life.

### **Preach to the Bones!**

God, however, doesn’t allow Ezekiel to beg off the question. Instead, God commands him, “Preach to the bones” (v4). Let me pause and say that I have preached to many dead congregations before but never to a cemetery! So, if I’m Ezekiel I’m saying, “No way Hosea!” But Ezekiel has far more vision than I do. “Ok Lord, I’ll do it, but you have to supply the manuscript.” God does. Thus, Ezekiel starts his message, not with a golf joke, but with an imperative:

***4 “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. 6 I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.”***

### **Preach to the Wind!**

As Ezekiel preaches, the bones start to rock, rattle, and roll (the leg bone connected to...). He watches in amazement as sinew and skin begin to grow over these newly assembled and erected bones. No wonder Stephen King called the Bible, “The scariest horror book of all.” However, when the bodies are fully formed, there is no life in them.

They’re just standing there, zombie-like. Thus, God gives Ezekiel a second command: “Preach to the wind” (v9). Ezekiel preaches to the wind (*Ruach/Pneuma, i.e., Holy Spirit*) and as he does the people, come back to life thus fulfilling his promise in 11:19-20:

***19 I will give them one heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, 20 so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.***

Historically speaking this national revival began in 458 B.C. when, under the commission of the Medo-Persian king, Artaxerxes, visionary leaders like Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, began rebuilding the city walls and the temple in Jerusalem.

Before we conclude, however, let me just say as a preacher, I find it both fascinating and humbling, that God's great vision works start with preaching. Why? Because according to 2 Timothy 3:16 God's word is Spirit breathed (*theopneustos*) and as such, is "Living and active" (Hebrews 4:12). Furthermore, "Faith comes by hearing and hearing the word of God" (Romans 10:9). Accurate and Spirit-empowered preaching of God's Word not only generates spiritual life in our souls but also blows wind into the "sails" of our vision!

### **Conclusion: Can Our Church Thrive Again?**

The last few weeks we have been preaching on our 3Gs Vision called "Get Grow, Go." Because vision leaks, let's review it again:

***Get: We will be an invitational Church that "gets" people into a life-transforming relationship with Jesus Christ.***

***Grow: We will "grow" the number of Christ-followers at Bay Point church to share the hope of Jesus Christ with the 450,000 souls in Sarasota County.***

***Go: We will equip 500 disciples to "go" and transform Sarasota County by 2025.***

Bay Point! Right now, we, not unlike Ezekiel, are standing in the "Valley of Vision" and God is asking us, "Can our church thrive again?" Can we thrive again in a post-church, secular age? Can we thrive again after Covid smashed the momentum we previously generated? Can we thrive again, even with all the "Vision Terminators" skulking around trying to terminate us? How you answer this question determines the future of Bay Point. If you are filled with the spirit of "Faith Based Optimism" and believe, to the very "joint and marrow" of your bones, that we will indeed thrive again, then something very dramatic must happen.

Come back next week to find out what this is!