

Life and Death
[Ezekiel 37: 1-14](#)
Rev. Curtis Bablitz
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As a parent, you know your kids are going to make mistakes. It is inevitable – they’re human beings, after all, and they’re still figuring out how to behave in different settings, how to control their bodies and their emotions, how to listen to all the things their parents are trying to teach them, and inevitably they’re going to mess up. So one of the most important things parents have to teach their kids is how to fix their mistakes – when you’ve broken something, you need to fix it. When you’ve hurt someone, you need to apologize, and try to make it right. Every mistake you make becomes an opportunity to learn so that you don’t keep making the same mistakes over and over again – so that when you get to be as old as your parents are, hopefully you make less mistakes than they do.

And all of this is hard work – it is hard to teach your children to fix their mistakes. But even harder than teaching them to fix their mistakes is teaching them that there are some mistakes that you just can’t fix. Sometimes when you break something, it stays broken. Sometimes when you hurt someone, the hurt goes so much deeper than you thought possible. It’s good for kids to learn to say sorry, but they also need to learn that saying sorry doesn’t just magically undo the harm that their actions caused. Sometimes you make a decision and it unleashes all sorts of unexpected trouble, and then you try to fix it but you just make everything

worse and worse, and at some point you need to just accept that your actions have consequences that can't always be undone. And this is really, really hard to understand and accept, even for supposedly responsible adults – we don't want to face the consequences of our mistakes any more than our kids do. We don't always want to reap what we sow, to accept that some things we've broken cannot be repaired, that the votes we cast cannot be withdrawn, the missiles we've launched can't be called back. Some things are just final, irrevocable, beyond repair, beyond hope.

I think that's what the people of Israel must have been thinking back in Ezekiel's day. Ezekiel was God's prophet at the darkest moment in the history of the people of Israel. For one thousand years since they had left slavery in Egypt and travelled with Moses to the promised land, the people of Israel had been a nation with a homeland, with an identity. For five hundred years since King David, the people of Israel had a kingdom with a stable government, they had built a prosperous society. And over all those years, they had fallen away from living the life God had called them to live, they had fallen away from being the people they were meant to be, a light to the nations around them, a holy nation of justice and mercy, and they had started to look just like every other nation around them. They were still God's people, living in the land God had given them, ruled by the King God had appointed for them, but they kept breaking God's law, breaking God's heart, they kept oppressing the poor and squandering the blessings they'd been given. And God had warned them that if they continued to live like all

the other nations, if they continued to ignore all the prophets God was sending, all the desperate pleas to repent and return to follow God's ways, if they continued down this path it would lead to destruction, to annihilation, to death. And that is exactly what happened. The armies of Babylon marched on Jerusalem and conquered it. They tore down the walls, burned down the city, killed everyone who resisted and enslaved everyone who surrendered, They carried them off into exile in far away lands. And everyone in Israel knew that this was the end of their story. This was the end of the people of Israel, because a nation could not continue without a homeland, without a government, without a king. At this point in human history, every single nation, every single people that had been conquered and enslaved and exiled, they all just disappeared, they all just melted away, absorbed by the people around them, and now that was going to happen to Israel. They would try to keep their culture going, try to teach their children the old ways they remembered from their homeland, but it's hard to do that when you're alone, cut off from your people, far away from all the others who remember. Your children born in exile won't want to remember – they'll go to Babylonian schools, learn Babylonian language, get Babylonian jobs, and when you try to take them aside to tell them about the old days in Israel, they'll roll their eyes and laugh, and then they'll marry Babylonian husbands and wives, and have Babylonian children, and when you die, you will die surrounded by the faces of your Babylonian family, and they'll hold a lovely Babylonian funeral and pray for your soul to Babylonian gods. You

will be the last generation to remember Jerusalem, the last generation to tell the stories of Moses and David, the last generation to worship Yahweh, the God of Israel. It's all over. We have become old, dry bones. All hope is gone. Our nation is finished. This is the end. And it's all our fault.

And so in this moment of darkness and despair, God brings a message to the people through the prophet Ezekiel. God picks up Ezekiel and carries him off across the desert to a distant valley, the site of some long-forgotten battle, a valley filled with dry bones. Centuries have passed since anyone has visited this god-forsaken spot – centuries have passed since these people travelling through this valley were ambushed and killed, since robbers carried away anything of value, since scavengers picked clean all the bones and they were baked white by the desert sun. There is nothing left of value here, nothing left to tell you anything about who these people were or how they died. The only thing left here is bones. Dead, dry bones. And God drops his chosen prophet Ezekiel down in the middle of this scene of complete devastation and despair, and asks him, Mortal, can these bones live? Look around you, Ezekiel. Do you see any hope for these dry bones?

And you have to give Ezekiel credit, because he knows God well enough to give a good answer. O Sovereign Lord, only you know. Ezekiel knows what he doesn't know, he knows when something is beyond him – he knows that power over life and death is something that belongs only to God. After all, he is only a human being, one simple human being, made of the same stuff as all these bones in the valley around him, so what could he

possibly know, what could he possibly do, about a situation as hopeless as this valley? Ezekiel knows that the problem of this valley, the problem of death, it is too big for him to solve, too big for him to understand, and so he leaves it to God. O Sovereign Lord, only you know.

But even though Ezekiel is convinced that he cannot know, that he cannot do, anything about this valley, anything about the death he sees all around him, God has something for Ezekiel to do. God tells Ezekiel, speak to the bones. Speak my words, speak my message, speak to these dead, dry bones and tell them to listen. Tell them what I'm going to do to them. Tell these bones that they're about to come back to life. And so Ezekiel speaks. There in that desolate valley, Ezekiel shouts out over the wind and speaks to the bones, speaks the message that God has given him to speak, and then he waits. And from all across the valley, the bones start to move. All across the once silent valley, the sounds of rattling bones, shifting and grinding and knocking against each other as they move together and shift into place, bone on bone, and then muscle and sinew and flesh start to grow and bind them together, and before Ezekiel's very eyes, the valley is filled with people, with human beings, human faces. But God isn't finished yet. The valley is filled with people now, people with flesh and blood, but they are still dead. If God stops now, they will just rot away again, slowly but surely they will turn back to dry bones. So God tells Ezekiel to speak to the winds, to call the breath of God from the wind to breathe into the dead bodies and make them live again. And so Ezekiel speaks. He speaks to the wind, and

the breath of God, the same creating spirit of God that was breathed into Adam at the beginning of creation, it comes rushing into the bodies assembled in that valley, and they come to life. They stand up, and they turn to one another and look at each other with astonishment, they greet old friends with words from a long dead language, remembering their last moments, wondering how they could possibly have survived, looking around at a world completely different from the one they once knew. God uses Ezekiel to speak words of power that bring life, incredible, unbelievable life, and God makes it perfectly clear that the same thing is going to happen to Israel, the same thing is going to happen to his people, living in isolation and exile and despair, convinced that they are doomed, convinced they have no hope, God is going to send his spirit moving among his people and bring them back to life. God promises Ezekiel that there is always hope, always hope for the people, that nothing, not even death, can possibly separate them from God's love. God promises Ezekiel that he will bring his people back from the dead, back from the grave, back from exile in faraway places, God will bring these people back together, he will breathe his spirit into their lives, and they will come back to life. And that life will be entirely new. Not the old, broken, selfish lives they were living, not the old ways where they kept failing to be who they were meant to be. God promises Ezekiel that he will re-create his people, that his spirit will make them capable of something entirely new, that the new life that awaits them will make it possible for them to become the holy nation of justice and mercy that they

were always meant to be. God is going to put a new heart in his people, a new kind of life, he is going to take their dry bones and bring them back to life.

And God's promise to the people of Israel is the same promise he gives to his people today, to the church, to us. When we look around at our world, at our church, at our lives, we can see all too easily all the brokenness, all the pain, all the mistakes we've made that seem impossible to repair, impossible to reverse. So much of the trouble we see is the consequence of our own failings, the consequences of human sinfulness and arrogance and carelessness and pride. We start to wonder what we can possibly do to make any difference in a world that is going mad all around us, how we can possibly speak any kind of word of hope to a broken and hurting world when we are broken and hurting, when we feel like old dry bones, like our hope is gone, like our future is finished. And yet we have God's promise that our story isn't finished yet. The story of the church, the story of God's people being the body of Jesus Christ here in this world, that story isn't finished yet. For a long time we've struggled to live as God's holy nation, sharing his justice and love in the way we were created for, but even in the midst of our pain, God is revealing to his church that he still has a plan for us, he still has work for us to do, he still wants to do amazing, wonderful things in this world with you and me, and he will not let anything stand in the way of that plan, he will not let anything derail the good future he has in store for this world, not even death can stop the power and hope of Jesus

Christ from coming into this world and transforming the church from dry bones into living witnesses to the resurrection. God is at work among us, God is speaking to us, God is calling us, God is picking us up and carrying us to where we need to be, telling us to speak his words to the dry bones in the valley, to speak his words to the winds all around us, to speak and then watch the new life he is going to bring into this world in us and through us in the days to come. Our God has promised us, I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live again, you will return to where you belong, you will know that the Lord is God, the Lord has spoken, and that nothing, not even death, can stop the power of Jesus Christ from working in this world, in you and me. All we have to do is speak the words we are given, even when it seems like we are all alone, even when it seems like no one is listening except for old dry bones. Speak the good news of Jesus Christ wherever you are, whoever you're with, and then listen. Listen for the sounds of bones rattling in the valley. Listen for the rush of the wind of God. Jesus Christ is at work, here and now, in you and me, wherever we are. The Lord has spoken. And when God speaks, the dead come back to life. In the name of Jesus Christ - Amen.

