A message of hope from sticks and bones

text: Ezekiel 37

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**Scriptures:** Ezekiel 37; Ephesians 2

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 173, 133, 493, 73c, 403, 224, 204

Series: Ezekiel (sermon #11)

Occasion: Lord’s Supper

Theme: Through a vision of dead bones being transformed into living people revealed to His prophet Ezekiel and a parable of two sticks being joined into one, the Lord gives hope to the despairing exiles that they would return to their homeland with new life and would once again be a united kingdom of His people.

Proposition: Do not despair, but wait with confident hope for the resurrection of your body and your entry into the land of promise in complete union with Christ and with all the children of God.

**Introduction**

Last week I read an account of a man who survived 24 hours in the ocean off Costa Rica with no floatation device – there was just himself, a pair of shorts, and water as far as the eye could see. He had parachuted into the open sea after the light plane he was flying in had engine trouble and was about to crash into the water below. As night fell, he started to lose hope, but then he saw lights in the distance coming from nearby land. As he swam towards these bright dots, he entered into a shoal of jelly fish which stung him repeatedly until huge welts were raised on his body. He kept going because the distance lights gave him hope of land. However, later than night the ocean currents took him back out to sea. As light dawned, he was weary, dehydrated and despaired of ever reaching land. He had lost hope in his ability to ever be able to swim the distance to shore. Just as he was ready to finally give up the struggle, he was rescued by a small fishing boat.

Hope is a key factor that research has identified is critical in determining how we negotiate suffering. If people believe that their suffering will end, or that some possibility of rescue is likely, they can endure incredible discomfort and persevere towards a goal that they believe they can reach. Here in New Zealand, we live in a beautiful country where we enjoy peace, have lots of open spaces, and very clean air by global standards, and yet we have a very high and increasing, suicide rate. There are many factors which can lead to human beings taking their own lives, but we could summarise them by saying that people die for lack of hope. The Scriptures wisely say that “*Hope deferred makes the heart sick*” (Prov 13:12). In this affluent 21st century nation of ours, people die of sick and broken hearts.

Having heard the news of the destruction of Jerusalem, which had occurred in 587BC, the exiles in Babylon certainly felt heart sick. Their hopes of returning home to their beloved country and the iconic JereusalemTemple were dashed. They felt like that man out at sea, drifting further from shore – away from all hope. Or to use the image from our text they felt like the lifeless skeletons: the dead remains of those long since slain. They said, ‘*Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off*' (Eze 37:11). They desperately needed hope, and that is exactly what the Lord, in His great compassion, gave them. Which brings us to our 1st point:

1. **The dead are made alive (1-14)**

In 1928 The Myers Jubilee Singers recorded the song “Dem Dry Bones”, the lyrics are inspired by the first part of our text in v1-14. In case you haven’t heard it before, this is how it goes:

“*Toe bone connected to the foot bone*

*Foot bone connected to the heel bone*

*Heel bone connected to the ankle bone*

*Ankle bone connected to the shin bone”*

*All the way up to*

*“Neck bone connected to the head bone*

*Now hear the word of the Lord”.*

*With the chorus:*

*“Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around x3.*

*Now hear the word of the Lord”.*

It’s a bright song, sometimes sung by groups of happy children dressed up as bony skeletons.

Yet the background starts off very darkly in our text as Ezekiel is shown a vision by the Spirit of the Lord. The opening scene is one of death and total desolation- a bleak barren landscape where a great multitude of people had been slain. Their flesh had long since rotted away, their bones then being baked dry in the sun. This is a shadowy valley where covenant curses have overthrown God’s people in a wilderness. (Perhaps reminiscent of all those Israelites who perished in the desert without entering the Promised Land). Ezekiel is asked the question:"*Son of man, can these bones live?*" and he replies, "*O Lord GOD, you know*." (v3). Wise answer☺ These bones are the remaining hard body parts of people who have been long dead, but never buried. It is a scene of utter hopelessness, loss and death.

Yet the Lord calls His prophet to speak to the bones, to prophesy over them and to say, “*O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD*” (v4). By now, Ezekiel was used by now to being instructed by the Lord to do some weird things. He was familiar with speaking to an unresponsive audience, many of whom refused to listen as the Lord had said they would (Eze 3:27), but here was a completely dead audience of skeleton parts! I find it hard enough myself preaching when the central section of the auditorium here is largely empty, but addressing a room full of dead bones – that would be a very tough commission!

Yet, as Ezekiel prophesies, the bones supernaturally come together with a rattling sound and are fitted with muscles and tendons and clothed with skin. They are now complete human bodies, but without life; like the body of Adam after the LORD God formed it from the dust of the ground (Gen 2:7). Then, as when the breath of life which God breathed into the nostrils of Adam’s body caused him to life, so similarly the life-giving breath of God came into these corpses and they were brought to life, standing up as an ‘*exceedingly great army*’ (v10).

The exiles despaired of their situation in exile. After the news of the fall of Jerusalem, they were dejected, downhearted and despondent, saying (Eze 37:11): '*Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off*.'

This vision of the dry bones coming to life was a message of hope to them from their covenant God who explained that the bones represented the ‘*whole house of Israel*’. He promised them new life when He would put His Spirit in them and then they would be placed in their own land (v14). This is not a vision of the resurrection of the dead, but rather a message of hope that the ‘graves of the exile’ would be opened so that the people could return to their homeland with the gift of new life.

This prophesy came true in part when some of these refugees returned home with Ezra and Nehemiah after 70 years of captivity in Babylon, but it finds ultimate fulfilment in the new life which God supernaturally gives to the spiritually dead. We read about this miraculous transformation in Ephesians 2: **“***And you were dead in the trespasses and sins…But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved*”. In Christ, there is life for the spiritually dead, because He has completed the work which saves.

Jesus Himself was truly cut off from the living on the cross, his body laid in the ‘valley’ of a grave. Just as the dry bones in the vision did not remain dead, so Christ did not remain in the tomb. He is the fulfilment of this prophesy and because of him, we are not spiritually dead dry bones, slain in sin any longer, but living, breathing Spirit-infused children of God (Rom 8:16).

Brothers and sisters, as we remember the death of the Lord Jesus Christ in the sacrament of Lord’s Supper today, we are reminded of God’s grace in raising us up to new life. We recall that the Lord has done what is humanly impossible; we can stand up in the Lord as an exceedingly great army of his people ready and willing to walk in the works which God has prepared for us beforehand (Eph 2:10). We are Christ’s soldiers, an army of disciples who have been raised to life so that we can follow our Captain as He leads us in victory. We march in faith, hope and love and we do not walk alone. Which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **The separated are joined together (15-28)**

We could write another song to describe the second part of our text, it might go something like this:

*“Dem sticks, dem sticks, dem divided sticks”*

*The lower one is glued together with upper one*

*Now hear the Word of the Lord”.*

Many people are familiar with the dry bones of Ezekiel 37, fewer know about the two sticks which Ezekiel is to take and label. The first stick is to be designated **‘**'*For Judah, and the people of Israel associated with him*', the second stick *'For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with him*’ (Eze 37:16). The first stick represents the Southern kingdom of Israel. The second one, the‘stick of Ephraim’, represents the whole Northern Kingdom. Ephraim was the second son of Joseph, a grandson of Jacob. When the land was allotted to the tribes of Israel, Ephraim was granted a portion in what later became the Northern Kingdom, and was the leading tribe there ([Judges 3:27](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Judg%203.27)). The Northern Kingdom had ceased to be an independent state 100 years prior when the Assyrians had captured the land. Now Judah, like ‘Joseph/Ephraim’ was scattered – the exiles were in Babylon.

Ezekiel is commanded by the Lord to enact a parable with the two labelled sticks by putting them end to end and grasping the join with his hand so that they appear as one single stick. This is another message of hope from the Lord – the promise of a coming reunion of the separated covenant people of Israel. Just as Ezekiel’s hand held the two sticks together, so the Lord would weld the detached tribes into one people again. This is what had happened during King David’s 33 year reign (2 Sam 5:5).

Now the Lord promises to reunite Israel under a new King who will rule a renewed people. This nation will no longer defile themselves with idols, ‘detestable things’ or any of their transgressions (Eze 37:23). This Davidic King will be their shepherd under whose caring rule they will willingly obey the commands of the Lord (v24). This kingdom will last forever as God establishes a covenant of everlasting peace with His people (25-26). In the midst of this reunited people God will set his sanctuary forever (v26). This sanctuary is the symbol of a holy God living with His holy people; a theme which we will see further developed in chapters 40-48.

After the fall of Judah to the Babylonians, the division between the Northern and Southern kingdoms was no longer significant for the Israelites. However the fulfilment of this message of hope was not fulfilled until Christ Jesus came to earth. Jesus is the Shepherd King who has unified God’s people, the New Israel. His is the Kingdom which will last forever. He has established a covenant of peace between God and His people. He Himself is the New Temple; his body the church being built up with living people into a spiritual house of which He is the solid foundation.

In the early New Testament church one of the clearest distinctions between people groups was that separating Jews and Gentiles. In Christ, the ‘Jewish stick’ has been joined to the ‘Gentile stick’, as we read in Ephesians 2:13-14 *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility”.*

God alone can create complete unity out of divided peoples. Just as with the Jews and Gentiles in the 1st century in Ephesus, our peace in this church comes not from shared ethnic ancestry, common history, compatible personalities or similar looks. Our peace comes from Christ, One Lord, One Holy Spirit, one faith. Jesus Himself is our Temple, our Sanctuary (ref. John 2:19).

We see our unity of fellowship together in Christ at Lord’s Supper. “*Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread*” (1 Cor 10:17). The sacrament of Lord’s Supper provides us with the same hope that the Lord’s message from the sticks and bones in Ezekiel 37 does. There is hope for new life for those who have been utterly dead in their sins and trespasses – like dry bones in a desert.

This hope has already been realised on this earth as Christ, having borne the full weight of the sins of God’s people has been raised to new life. This hope is already realised on this earth as God’s people display vital signs of spiritual life, having been raised to new life in Christ. There is hope for reunion of those who have been separated through conflict, strife, and hatred. This hope has already been realised on this earth as Christ has broken down the hostility which sinful people bear towards one another.

The man who was adrift at sea saw the lights on the shore, which gave him hope, but he couldn’t swim the distance. As he finally lost all hope, a boat came by and rescued him. Brothers and sisters, Christ has rescued us. We cannot rescue ourselves.

Lord’s Supper is a reminder of this rich mercy of God, this great love of the Father, this grace by which you have been saved. Do not lose hope, for whilst you and I do not have the strength to cross over from this world into the next, Christ Himself is the ‘vessel’ who will carry us there.

Friend, perhaps today you realise that your hope has been based on your own ability to rescue yourself and you now despair because you don’t have the strength. Hope is fading and life seems increasingly pointless and dark. In your heart you may echo those desperate words: ‘*My bones are dried up, and my hope is lost; I am clean cut off*.' Come to Jesus Christ now. In Him there is life forever. He gives strength to the weak and hope to the hopeless. Proverbs 13:12 wisely states that“*Hope deferred makes the heart sick*”, but adds that “*a desire fulfilled is a tree of life*”. Desire Christ and that good desire will be fulfilled, you will find hope.

Brothers and sisters, we have been raised in Christ to be a united army of the Lord, strong in the strength of His might. Be nourished in your faith, hope and love as you participate in and witness the sacrament of Lord’s Supper where we remember the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, give thanks for the life we have in Him and look forward to His return when we shall see the fullness of the whole congregation of God’s people who are joined together forever in Him.

AMEN