

CAN THESE BONES LIVE?**EZEKIEL 37:1-14**

Arturo Toscanini was once the most famous orchestra conductor in the United States. In 1931, when radio was the king of all media, NBC invited Toscanini to conduct a concert tour of Latin America. The day came for the musicians in one particular country to all come together to begin rehearsing Beethoven's Sixth Symphony. These were professionals well acquainted with that piece of music. But something magical happened when Toscanini began to direct them. They could just sense it. No one was daydreaming; all were intent and intense – playing as if it were entirely new. When Toscanini laid down his baton at the end, the members of the orchestra rose to their feet in applause. He just stood there until the applause ended. Then he said to them, "That's not Toscanini; that's Beethoven. You just never heard him before." Most of us here today have celebrated Easter Day many times. You might say we're professional Easter celebrators. We know the drill. We color some eggs. We eat some chocolate. We sing songs we don't sing any other time of the year. We hear again that Jesus rose from the dead. After church, we go out and eat a big meal somewhere. Maybe like those professional musicians when it came to Beethoven, our experience of Easter needs to take on new life, new significance, and new meaning. We need to hear it again. More to the point, we need to experience it again.

Easter is all about life – real life as God intended it. Sure, all life come from and depends on God ultimately. God is the Creator and Sustainer of all biological life here and anywhere else in the universe. But God is also the giver of life in a second sense – spiritual life. When people say, "Now, that's really living" or "Why don't you go out and get a life", they're not talking about physical life, are they? No, they're talking about the quality of life – life at an emotional or spiritual level that's more than just biological life. Many people don't realize that God is the Giver of that kind of life, too.

I want to read a passage in the Bible to you. It's about an amazing vision that God gave to a Jewish prophet called Ezekiel some 600 years before Jesus – or about 2600 years from today. Ezekiel and the Jewish people of that day and time were enduring great difficulty. Most of them including Ezekiel had been defeated by the great and powerful Babylonian army and deported back to Babylon to live out their lives in exile. About ten years into that period of exile which actually lasted seventy years, God gave Ezekiel an amazing vision. Let's look at it together just now.

Quite the vision, yes? Heaps and heaps of bleached, dry, dead bones scattered as far as the eye could see. After Ezekiel walks around feeling overwhelmed by this massive number of bones, God asks him an interesting question, "... 'Can these bones live?' I said, 'O Sovereign Lord, you alone know.'" (Ezk 37:3 NIV) The vision implies that only God gives life – physical, emotional, spiritual, whatever. The bones rattles and come together in Ezekiel's vision. Muscles, tendons, and skin cover the bones. What point was God trying to make? God creates biological life, to be sure. But God also creates spiritual life, real life, true life. That was the great and enduring truth of the vision.

I declare to you this Easter Day that there are some dead, dry bones in this place of worship this very day – right now – this very moment. If you've never been born again by the Spirit of God, the Bible says you resemble a pile of dead, dry bones. You may be a physically attractive person. You may be dressed nicely. But if the Holy Spirit of God doesn't live in you, all God sees is a pile of dead, dry, lifeless bones – spiritually speaking. Most of us here today have been born again by the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, there may well be some areas of spiritual dryness and deadness that God needs to make alive in you, child of God. I tell you this Easter Day – no matter who you are – that only the resurrection of Jesus brings life. All life comes from God. I want you to hear God asking you and me this Easter Day the same question He asked Ezekiel, “CAN these bones live? Can THESE bones live? Can these bones LIVE?” The fact is that each of us probably have some dry, dead bones that need to be made alive by the Spirit of God – maybe for the first time, maybe for the one hundredth time. Dry, dead spiritual bones come in all kinds of varieties. The first group we might call...

THE DRY BONES OF SINFUL LIVING

Nothing will bleach and dry out your soul more quickly and thoroughly than sinful living. That's why the Jewish people had been deported to Babylon. They'd been guilty as a nation of worshipping other gods. Widespread, persistent idolatry. What's sin, again? It's about our refusal to love God and live under His authority. It involves the attitudes of our heart. It includes not only bad things we do but the good things we fail to do. Every one of us here today is a sinner. The only difference is whether you're a forgiven sinner or not. God said the penalty for any sin and all sin is death. But then He provided a substitute – Himself, in the person of His Son, Jesus. Jesus paid our penalty at the cross. When Jesus died, He died for our sins. But, how can God actually forgive our personal sins? The Bible says when we come before Him admitting our sin, asking Him to forgive us, putting our trust in Jesus, and turning away from sinful attitudes and behaviors, God forgives us of our sins. The Holy Spirit enters your life at that very moment and you are born again. You're given new, spiritual, eternal life then and there. Now, if Jesus had stayed in the tomb there could be no lasting, ongoing forgiveness of our sins. It's Jesus' resurrection that allows God to keep on forgiving your sins and mine - even the ones we haven't committed yet, but will. That's why the Bible says, “And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins.” (1 Cor 15:17 NLT)

Sin causes death to everything it touches – the death of relationships between people, the death of healthy self-respect, and the death of inner peace and joy. It ultimately destroys all it touches. The sad thing is many people aren't aware of how much sin is a fact in their lives. It's like some fire fighters in Manchester, England years ago who burst into a burning home in full suits even wearing oxygen masks. In the home they found a woman and her two daughters just watching TV. Even though the fire and smoke was raging around these three gals, the fire fighters had to persuade them to leave the house! Many people are completely oblivious to the impact that sin has made upon their own lives. They're unaware of the death and destruction it causes. You may even be a follower of Jesus today, but you, too, can fall into a pattern of sinful living.

Can that happen to a born again person? Sure! Just because you believe in Jesus doesn't mean you automatically stop sinning, does it? You might want to ask God for His forgiveness today, but you're deeply ashamed of something in your life and you fear God will reject you. Don't believe that lie! The Bible says, "So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus." (Rom 8:1 NLT) If you will confess your sin and ask God's help to turn away from that sin, He will completely forgive you. In fact, if you're like me, you have to come before God regularly and often to receive His forgiveness. Sin, in any form, dries up and brings death to our lives. God will give us a new beginning every day because of Jesus' resurrection. He says He will separate us from the guilt of our sin as far as the east is from the west. He will replace the dry, dead bones of guilt, shame, and condemnation with His life, His peace, and His joy.

Don't be like one woman I read about. She and her husband had achieved a level of financial success that allowed them to pay someone to clean their home. They went to an agency and hired someone to come in once a week to clean. This person was scheduled to come for the first time the following Friday. On Thursday, the husband came home unexpectedly in the middle of the day to pick up some papers he'd forgotten. He found his wife home early from her job, dressed in her oldest cleaning clothes, surrounded by mops, buckets, sponges, rags, and lots of spray bottles. He asked, "What on earth are you doing?" She said, "Well, the new cleaning lady is coming tomorrow. I couldn't stand to have her see the house a mess." God already knows all about the mess in your life and mine. He's the only One who can really clean it up. Your efforts to clean up your own life will never do what only He can do. So, can THESE bones live – the dry, dead bones of sinful living? Oh, yes, they can, but only by the Spirit of God. "I will put My Spirit within you and you will live." (Ezk 37:14 NIV)

THE DRY BONES OF DISCOURAGED LIVING

Not just sinful living will dry out and kill your soul. Discouraged living will do the job nearly as well. Discouraged living is when the painful experiences of life get the better of you and you live in a perpetual state of despair, anxiety, and sadness. This was exactly what had happened to Ezekiel and the Jewish people living in exile. They were filled with despair. They'd suffered a humiliating defeat. Their country had been destroyed. The city of Jerusalem was in ruins. Even the great temple – the place where they had worshiped the Lord – had been leveled. Most of the Jewish people were put in chains and carted off to live out the rest of their lives in a foreign country as slaves. As the Jewish people languished there in Babylon feeling desolated, humiliated, and forgotten, questions were asked, "Where is God? Why has He abandoned us?" I can only imagine that the disciples felt much the same way on the day Jesus was crucified. They didn't expect any resurrection. All they saw was a total, final defeat and the death of One they'd come to love with all of their hearts. They were overwhelmed with desolation. "Where is God? Why has He abandoned us?"

Have you ever asked those questions? I have. And when we do – for whatever reason – we are experiencing discouraged living. As a pastor, I've seen the many different events and circumstances that cause deep discouragement to people: the incredible

pain of physical or sexual abuse, the trauma of divorce, broken relationships between parents and kids, the suffering caused by poor financial decisions, the effects of chronic illness or a terminal disease, the deep sense of loss when a loved one dies. It can be anything that just leaves this great, empty, painful hole deep inside of you. You can't help but cry out, "God, where are You? God are You really even there at all?"

Jesus' resurrection can actually allow you to experience new life even in the midst of great discouragement. If you've followed Jesus for any length of time, you know that God doesn't always provide an escape from life's problems and troubles. Quite frankly, God uses some painful things to shape, mold, and mature us in positive ways. But God doesn't want any one of His children defeated, broken, or beaten down by life's difficult events and experiences. Instead, He wants us to turn to Him in faith and say, "OK, Lord, here is this painful experience. I don't know how you're going to do it, but bring glory to Yourself and good to me through it." And God does that! God's Spirit flows into and around us so that we receive power in our weakness, healing in our brokenness, courage in our fear, perseverance in our weakness, joy in our pain, and peace in our turmoil. Just like the first Easter Day, the blackness of death will dissolve into the sunrise of new life. Out of our endings, Jesus brings new beginnings. Can THESE bones lives – even the dry, dead bones of discouraged living? Oh, yes, they can, but only by the Spirit of God! "I will put My Spirit within you and you will live."

THE DRY BONES OF GODLESS LIVING

Isn't that the same as sinful living which I mentioned earlier? Here's how I distinguish the difference. Godless living is simply living every day as if God is irrelevant. It's not about going out and committing sins large or small. Instead, godless living is the result of letting everything else in life – my job, my family, my leisure activities, or my relationships – consume so much of my time and energy that any meaningful relationship with the God of the universe is pushed to the margins of my life. We end up chasing and pursuing things in life that ultimately are not very important. It reminds me of a family that enjoyed camping. They kept the family pet chained outside their tent, but were awakened during the night by excited barking. The unmistakable aroma of a skunk explained the disturbance. The next evening at dusk this same family was driving slowly back to their campsite from the shower house. Just ahead they saw a lantern bobbing as someone ran along with it. Then they saw a couple in pursuit of a hairy, black creature with a telltale white stripe down its back. The first thought of the husband and father in the car was this one, "These people are even dumber than our dog. Just what are they going to do if they catch that skunk?" People spend entire lifetimes chasing things they don't fully understand and will not be happy with even if they ever do get them! So much of what we are encouraged to pursue in our culture looks interesting and exciting, but in the end, we just get "skunked."

We live right smack dab in the middle of godless living. Think about most of your neighbors or the people with whom you work or go to school. People aren't anti-God; they just have no particular use for Him. People aren't out there committing terrible sins; they just consider Jesus – and even His death and resurrection – as pretty much

irrelevant. That's why they're not here or at any church today. They're probably good, decent folk who believe that a God exists, but there's no relationship with that God or any real interest in Him. So, what's the result of godless living? Over time, your life becomes trivial because it lacks any real purpose or meaning. You can't live a meaningful life while keeping God at arm's length. Why? Because Jesus is life and the deepest meaning of life. He alone can give your life a purpose worthy of it. Knowing Him and growing in that knowledge is what brings any lasting value to your life or mine.

Child of God, be on your guard against godless living. Can godless living happen to people who believe in Jesus? Sure. Godless living is what caused the Jewish people – God's people in the Old Testament – to fall and to fail. It can happen very slowly. You stop meditating on God's Word. You stop praying. You don't make any effort to grow in your faith or follow Jesus. Being a meaningful part of any local church becomes an option. Serving the Lord gets pushed aside. The things of this life dominate your thoughts, your time, and your energy. What can you do if that happens? Invite the risen Lord Jesus back from the edges of your life and install Him once again at the very center of it. Invite the risen Lord Jesus from the sidelines of your life and install Him once again upon the throne of your life. So, can THESE bones live – even the dry, dead bones caused by godless living? Oh, yes, they can, but only by the Spirit of God! "I will put My Spirit within you and you will live." (Ezk 37:14 NIV)

THE DRY BONES OF HOPELESS LIVING

Hopeless living is the result of having no adequate answer to the reality of death. Years ago, I attended an event for students. The speaker that day, who knew how to get young people's attention, said his favorite subject was death. He went on to say, "You know, one day you will die. People will go out to the cemetery, throw dirt on your face, and then go back to the church and eat potato salad." Yes, rather blunt and stark, but he had a point! Are you ready to die? It will happen to every person in this room sooner or later. If you are not ready to die this Easter Day, you are living without hope. We will all die, but some of us here today will die with hope and others will die without hope. I have yet to understand how any person can face the reality of his or her own death or the death of a precious loved ones, if there is no hope of eternal life. The Bible says, "And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world." (1 Cor 15:19 NLT)

How do you deal with the finality and inevitability of death? Only a person in whom the Holy Spirit lives can approach death with hope. Why? Because of the resurrection of Jesus. The Bible says, "... God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation, and we have a priceless inheritance—an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay." (1 Pt 1:3-4 NLT) None of us want to die. I don't want to die. But I know that my death is not the end of me. I believe that when the moment of my death comes, God will give me a certainty about my eternal destination. That's a hope that any child of God can possess. Indeed, we stake our present lives and our future hopes on the One who never lied. It was Jesus who said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who

believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die....” (John 11:25-26 NLT) Do you have that hope today? Do you know what will happen to you when you die? Do you know where you will spend eternity? Can THESE bones live – even the dry, dead bones of hopeless living? Oh, yes, they can, but only by the Spirit of God! “I will put My Spirit within you and you will live.” (Ezk 37:14 NIV)

Her real name was Edith Burns. Her nickname was Edith Easter. That’s because she had a habit of introducing herself to strangers like this, “Hello, my name is Edith Burns. Do you believe in Easter?” Then she would go on to explain the meaning of Easter. Many times people became followers of Jesus after such a conversation with Edith. One day Edith went to see Dr. Phillips, her family doctor. Edith was his favorite patient. But on this day, his heart was heavy for his friend, Edith. He glanced outside into his waiting room and saw her sitting out there with a big, black Bible on her lap earnestly talking with a young mother who was sitting beside her. Dr. Phillips looked around his office and saw his head nurse, Beverly. Beverly had first met Edith when she was taking her blood pressure. Edith said, “Hello, my name is Edith Burns. Do you believe in Easter?” A little started, Beverly said, “Why, yes, I guess I do.” Edith probed, “Well, what do you believe about Easter?” Beverly said, “Well, it’s all about egg hunts, going to church, and getting dressed up.” Edith went on to explain the real and deeper meaning of Easter to Beverly. Beverly eventually became a disciple of Jesus.

Edith was finally called into Dr. Phillip’s inner office. She sat down, took one look at his face and said, “Doctor, why are you so sad? Are you reading your Bible? Are you praying?” Dr. Phillips said as gently as possible, “Edith, your lab report came back. You have cancer. My friend, you’re not going to live very long.” Edith said, “Why Dr. Phillips, shame on you! Why are you so sad? Do you think God makes mistakes? You’re just told me that I’m going to see the Lord Jesus, my beloved husband, and my friends very soon. You’ve just told me that I’m going to get to celebrate Easter forever and here you are having difficulty giving me my ticket!” Dr. Phillips just grinned and thought to himself, “What a marvelous woman you are, Edith Burns!”

Some time later, Edith called Dr. Phillips and told him it was time for her to go to a long term nursing facility, “Doctor, would you make sure that they put women next to me in my room who need to know about Easter?” That happened and several women who shared Edith’s room became disciples of Jesus. Everybody on her floor at the nursing facility loved Edith; everyone, that is, except Phyllis, the head nurse. Phyllis thought Edith was a religious nutcase. Phyllis had been married three times and served as a nurse in an army hospital. She’d seen it all and heard it all. Life’s disappointments had made her hard and cold. One morning, two nurses on Edith’s floor called in sick. Edith had gotten the flu and Phyllis, who had tried very hard to avoid Edith, came in to give her a shot. When she walked in, Edith had a big smile on her face and she said, “Phyllis, God loves and I love you. I’ve been praying for you.” Phyllis said, “Well, you can quit praying for me. It won’t work. I’m not interested.” Edith replied, “Well, I will pray just the same. I’ve asked God not to let me go home until you become a part of His family.” Phyllis said, “Then you’ll never die, because that will never happen.” She

turned and walked out the door of Edith's room. Every day for several day, Edith would say to Phyllis the first time she walked in the room, "God loves you, Phyllis, and I love you. I'm praying for you."

One day, Phyllis felt drawn to Edith's room like a magnet draws iron. She sat down on the bed and Edith said, "I'm so glad you've come, because God told me that today is your special day." Phyllis said, "Edith, you ask everybody the question, 'Do you believe in Easter?' You've never asked me." Edith replied, "I wanted to many times, but God told me to wait until you asked, and now that you've asked..." Edith took out her Bible and shared the Easter story with Phyllis – the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Then Edith asked, "Phyllis, do you believe in Easter? Do you believe that Jesus is alive and that He wants to live in your heart?" Phyllis said, "I want to believe that with all of my heart. I do want Jesus in my life." And so, right there in Edith Easter's room, Phyllis prayed and became a follower of Jesus. She didn't just walk out of Edith's room that day. Phyllis felt as if she was carried out on angels' wings.

Two day later, Phyllis came into Edith's room and Edith said, "Do you know what day it is?" Phyllis said, "It's Good Friday." Edith laughed, "Oh, no, for you every day is Easter now. Happy Easter, Phyllis!" On Easter Sunday, Phyllis reported for work. On the way in she stopped at a flower shop and got some Easter lilies to give to Edith as a gift. When she walked into the room, Edith was sitting up in bed. Her big, black Bible was on her lap. Her hands were in her Bible and there was a sweet smile on her face. It was then that Phyllis realized Edith was dead. Her left hand was on John 14 where Jesus said, "In my Father's house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you. I will come again and receive you to Myself so that where I am, there you may be also." Her right hand was on Revelation 21 which says, "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor pain, for the former things have passed away." Phyllis lifted her face to Heaven, and with tears streaming down her cheeks said, "Happy Easter, Edith. Happy Easter." Then, she walked out of that room and over to a table where two student nurses were sitting. She said to them, "Hello. My name is Phyllis. Do you believe in Easter?"

So, do you? Do you believe in Easter? I hope you're more than just a professional Easter celebrator. I hope you know and live out the reality of Easter every day. CAN these bones live? Can THESE bones live? Can these bones LIVE? Oh, yes, they can, but only by the Spirit of God! "I will put My Spirit within you and you will live." (Ezk 37:14 NIV)