

“Sent to Bring New Life”

Ezekiel 37:1–14; John 17:18

John 17:18 ESV

As Jesus said to the Father, “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.”

Here it is, real simple: If you are a human being—Jesus was sent to you; if you are a disciple of Christ—Jesus sends you to tell others He was sent for them.

God is in even the most desolate and hopeless of places AND God brings hope and new life.

God is *with us* in even the most desolate and hopeless of places.

God is with you in even the most desolate and hopeless of places.

He is with us in times of pain, uncertainty, fear, waiting, and also joy. Constant. Unending. Unwavering. Never-ceasing. Forever. Eternal. Powerful love.

Christmas is a time to remember that God has come to be with us, and to bring renewal. New hope and new life.

Jesus was sent to the earth—fully God who became fully human. Jesus was and is the new hope and the new life and in Him we might also have new hope and new life. Jesus was sent to the earth to bring new life and life to the fullest—life abundant for me, life abundant for you, life abundant for all of creation. Salvation means creation healed.

Death was never supposed to be a part of the picture. Evil was never supposed to be part of the picture. Violence was never supposed to be part of the picture. Yet all of our lives, all of existence, we faced a horrid reality. A reality warped by these dark forces. The world seems to know—and the Church certainly knows—things are not right here on the 3rd rock from the Sun.

But Jesus came to heal it all. New life, renewal, rebirth.

I want to share with you from Ezekiel 37:1–14 about the valley of the dry bones. Ezekiel is a book in the Bible, located in the prophets’ section of the Old Testament. Ezekiel was a prophet of Israel, writing before Jesus came.

Ezekiel 37:1-14 ESV

37 The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. 2 And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. 3 And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I

answered, “O Lord God, you know.” 4 Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5 Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath (Spirit) to enter you, and you shall live. 6 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.”

7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling (earthquake), and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. 9 Then 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 the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

11 Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’ 12 Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. 14 And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord.”

Can you imagine witnessing this? Can you imagine being Ezekiel and having this jaw-dropping, reality-shattering encounter with the Almighty?

What was going on here?

God directed Ezekiel to prophesy the rebirth of Israel in chapter 36. God announced, through the prophet, that Israel will be restored to her land in blessing under the leadership of “David, My servant [who] shall be king over them” (Ezekiel 37:24), clearly a reference to the future under Jesus Christ the Messiah, descendant of David (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6–7; Luke 1:31–33). However, this promise seemed impossible in light of Israel’s present condition. She was “dead” as a nation, deprived of her land, her king, and her temple. She had been divided and dispersed for so long that unification and restoration seemed impossible. So God gave Ezekiel the vision of the dry bones as sign.

God transported Ezekiel—not literally, but in a vision, a vision that felt like reality—to a valley full of dry bones. Yes, we are talking about a valley of skeletons here. If you were thinking that you were correct. And then the best special effects take place—beyond Oscar-winning.

What did God tell Ezekiel to do? Preach to skeletons. Preach to skeletons. Preach to skeletons. Seems crazy, but you know what's even crazier?...—it's foreshadowing! Who else do we know from the Bible who has the power to restore life to the dead? Who else preached to skeletons? I mean, really, actually, not in some vision, but—*it actually happened*—preached to skeletons? Jesus.

Are you familiar with the line “He descended to the dead” in the Apostle’s Creed?

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
 maker of heaven and earth;
 And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
 who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
 born of the Virgin Mary,
 suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
 On the third day he rose again...

Jesus descended to the dead? What does that mean? Why did He do it? That line affirms a doctrine of the historic Christian church known as the Harrowing of Hell. Jesus preached to skeletons. Jesus was sent to bring new life. Go look it up.

Back to Ezekiel...

He preached to skeletons... then God breathed life just as in creation in Gen 2:7, when God breathed life into Adam. Ezekiel obeyed, the bones came together, flesh developed, skin covered the flesh, breath entered the bodies, and they stood up. They stood up! Alive! They stood up in a vast army.

What it meant then—this vision symbolized the whole house of Israel that was then in captivity. Like unburied skeletons, the people were in a state of living death, pining away with no end to their judgment in sight. They thought their hope was gone and they were cut off from the forgiveness of God forever. The surviving Israelites felt their national hopes had been dashed and the nation had died in the flames of Babylon’s attack with no hope of resurrection.

The reviving of the dry bones signified God’s plan for Israel’s future national restoration. The vision also, and most importantly, showed that Israel’s new life depended on God’s power and

not the circumstances of the people. Putting “breath” by God’s Spirit into the bones showed that God would not only restore them physically but also spiritually.

To be clear, the Jewish people who are Israeli citizens residing in the Holy Land today are not the fulfillment of this prophecy. The prophecy is fulfilled when God re-gathers believing Israelites to the land (Jeremiah 31:33; 33:14–16) and Christ returns to establish His forever Kingdom (Matthew 24:30–31). The Israel of the future discussed in the Bible is the Church, the family God is gathering in Christ.

This is a story about God—God’s power—God’s power to bring new life.

Our God can wake the dead.

Perhaps there has been a time in your ministry or in your life when you felt that there was nothing but dry bones, and God did a special work in bringing things to life. That’s renewal. Re-newing life. New life. That’s what life with God is all about—new hope and new opportunities.

Like an inflatable innertube life beats on you and you become deflated, but God’s life-giving breath is limitless and His Spirit fills you up again. Christian, be filled again.

Ezekiel’s encounter with God shows that there can be hope in some of the most hopeless situations. God’s people had been driven into exile and were dispersed throughout the land. The church and our world today can sometimes seem like a pile of dry bones, and yet the world is ripe with the possibilities of new life and God at work.

Is there new hope and new opportunities for you? Yes. God wants to do a new work in you.

Is there new hope and new opportunities for the Church in the world today? Yes. Christ wants to do a new work in His Church and through His Church.

Who else needs new hope in Jesus? Who else needs a new opportunity to discover Him?
Everyone around you!

Is there new hope and new opportunities for your neighbors? Yes. God desperately wants to do a new work in them too.

Only God could breathe life into the bones, but God wanted Ezekiel to participate in the work too. He told Ezekiel to speak his words of life over the dry bones. This tells us that words are powerful! God has given all of us the privilege of standing in the valley, and we, like Ezekiel, have a choice. We can believe that the bones will live, or we can refuse to believe. Sometimes we get so discouraged with problems that are right in front of us that we forget the power of God.

Dear friend, we are standing in the valley now. Perhaps there has never been a worse time to be the Church. We face so many obstacles. Perhaps there has never been a more exciting time to

be the Church because our God crushes obstacles. I believe we will see amazing Kingdom things in the future.

Friend, every day you stand in the valley with the choice in front of you. The choice is the great crisis of faith—it is the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Real. Undeniable. A person. Not an idea. Not a myth. Not just a piece of history. Jesus—a God reached out to you desiring relationship. The choice is yours.

Sometimes we get so discouraged with problems that are right in front of us that we forget the power of God. What would happen if we, like Ezekiel, began speaking prophetic and encouraging words over ourselves? What a rattling sound there would be! Would the earth quake again? Suddenly people who had never engaged in ministry or barely attended church might start giving their lives to Jesus' kingdom work in our communities, cities, and world.

You have the power and authority in Jesus Christ to speak encouraging words to one another.

Proverbs 18:21 ESV

²¹ Death and life are in the power of the tongue,
and those who love it will eat its fruits.

You have the power and authority in Jesus Christ to proclaim words of new hope into the so-called hopeless places of this world.

Without the Spirit of God at the center of our work, it is mere busyness. And busyness does not bring life; it makes people tired and ultimately brings death. How many of us find ourselves surrounded by church folk who are exhausted, parched, and dry from their experiences of church? We all want new life. We want a new way of navigating the chaos of modern life.

That first Christmas, God brought new life to the world in the form of a simple gift—a baby. Instead of coming with fanfare or with political or religious power, God arrived as a poor carpenter's son, born in a feeding trough. When the rest of the world anticipated power through dominance and violence, economic progress and military might, God's gift came wrapped in swaddling cloth and lying in a manger.

Why was Jesus sent? Jesus tells us Himself:

John 10:10 ESV

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Jesus was sent to the earth—fully God who became fully human. Jesus was and is the new hope and the new life and in Him we might also have new hope and new life. Jesus was sent to the

earth to bring new life and life to the fullest—life abundant for me, life abundant for you, life abundant for our neighbors, life abundant for all of creation. Salvation means creation healed.

God sees the dry bones in all of us. There is deadness in us all, and God knows we need new life. We need God's Spirit breathed into our churches and us. Today is the perfect time. Let it be today.

God the Father, YHWH, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is in even the most desolate and hopeless of places and brings new hope and new life. God the Son, Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, is in even the most desolate and hopeless of places and brings new hope and new life. God the Holy Spirit, sent to comfort, guide, and counsel us, is in even the most desolate and hopeless of places and brings new hope and new life.

We must know and remember that God meets us in the dry places of this world, in the dry places of our lives, in the dry places of our souls, and calls us to play a part in His renewing of the world. He calls us to new life and He calls us forward. Faith moves forward.

God empowers us to use our gifts for His kingdom purposes. By gifts I mean spiritual gifts, yes, but also resources, possessions, power, privilege, our relationships, our networks, our words, our actions, our choices—everything we can surrender to Him for His purpose and His glory—God can and will use it.

God does not waste a person or a gift. You are not a waste. You are a treasured child. God does not waste a person or a gift. Every single gift—every single person—can be used to change the world.

God means for you to be a world-changer.

Jesus was God's gift to the world. Jesus was *the* way God could fix things, and reconcile us out of sin and death back into relationship with Him. The Father found a way of putting His family back together, and He sent His Son.

Jesus was God's gift to the world. And you are too.

So this year, when you celebrate new hope and new life, think about everyone around you who does not have that same hope and life. Think about the dry bones. Don't be afraid to preach to skeletons. Then ask Jesus, "Who are you sending me to?"

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.