

**FINDING LIFE IN A DEAD WORLD**  
**Ezekiel 37-1-14**

**Living God's Word—A Walk Through the Bible**  
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**Pastor Nathan J. Thompson**

An increasingly common comment from people is that they are having a difficult time knowing how to believe in God. There are many who want to know the basics of how and why to believe; how to live a Christian life? It is true that there are more and more people coming to worship each week who are seeking some assurance and practical helps in living as a Christian.

Now this is really a new paradigm for churches and denominations including Lutherans. We have usually assumed that those who come to our churches have grown up in Christian homes; have learned the basics of faith in Sunday School and Confirmation; have learned an understanding and appreciation of worship from a very young age.

As a result, churches have then assumed that the traditional liturgies are going to speak to everyone; that everyone knows and loves the great hymns of faith that we grew up with; that sermons that stress deep doctrinal and theological issues are what people really need.

Some years ago in a new member class I was asked one of the most profound questions I have ever been asked. The person wondered, "What is a narthex?" You know, the church often assumes that everyone knows insider church language, along with Lutheran church history and humor; that they all understand and treasure the same rituals and traditions.

Yet an increasing number of people are back at square one. They may have been away from the church for many years; perhaps they never had a church upbringing and background; yet if they did, they may have been turned off by it all. Sunday School and Confirmation for some people were something simply to endure, they couldn't wait until they were confirmed and didn't need to go to church anymore.

What many therefore are searching for is how to know Jesus in a personal way (they never really learned that when they were young). They want to have some practical Biblical helps in things like how to be a better parent, how to deal with a divorce, how to live as a single person. They want to know if prayer really works and if God can help them set better priorities.

The prophet Ezekiel, in our Walk Through the Bible, had a vision for the people of Israel which also applies to today. He saw a valley of dry bones, skeletons in every direction, hundreds of bones heaped on top of each other. The Lord then asked Ezekiel, "*Can these dry bones live?*" Ezekiel was actually dreaming about the people of Israel who had lost their hope and purpose.

Now that same image can easily be applied to us. There are lots of dry bones around. Part of the reason for this, I believe, is because increasing numbers of people do not know Jesus as their friend. Yet the truth is that those who are searching, who want the church to be more helpful, are not the dry bones. In fact, they are often the ones in whom God is working to bring new life.

Rather, the dry bones of today are those who assume they have their spiritual life all together. Dry bones are found where the focus of Biblical truth and mission is transferred to simply personal opinion and worldly values.

They are found where one's worship focus is not on praise and the transforming power of Jesus, rather it is on worshipping the way we've always done it; where we simply go through the motions and hardly think about how God is working in us.

Yet the point of Ezekiel's dream is, "Can these dry bones live?" Can those who are searching find assurance? Can those who are dry spiritually find life? God's answer is, "Yes, they can." He tells Ezekiel, *"I will put my Spirit in you and you will live."* The only way dry bones can live is if God, through his Holy Spirit, breathes his life into us.

Yet how does God's Spirit breathe life into us? One important way is for us to take the time to read and study God's word of truth; to take the time reflect on its meaning and message. The Bible says that *"faith comes from what is heard."* It is when we truly listen that the Holy Spirit can open our eyes and heart to see the truth that God is speaking right to us.

Martin Luther, after years of intense intellectual study of the Bible, came upon that great Biblical truth that we are justified and saved only by God's grace through faith. Luther said that when the Holy Spirit revealed that truth to him it was like he was born again. God opened this message to Luther and it became the central Biblical truth that brought about the Reformation.

Now I know that many of you here today have had times when that same light of truth has gone on in your heart. There may have been times when you have heard a sermon, were reading the Bible or were in a Bible study, when you felt God speaking directly to you. The Holy Spirit definitely breathes his life and inspiration into us when we allow God to speak through his Word.

Another way for the Holy Spirit to work in us is through faithful worship. God has chosen, the Bible tells us, to speak to his people when they gather as a community; when they sing, pray, listen, share in communion and fellowship together. Yet to experience the Holy Spirit we cannot be simply spectators but participants. We need to invest our hearts and lives in God through committed worship; through trusting in his miracles and power.

The Holy Spirit also works in us when we set aside time to pray, to be quiet, to share our deepest needs and feelings with him. Sometimes life is so busy, we are so preoccupied, that we aren't aware that God's Spirit wants to work in us; he wants to fill us with his never failing love.

I am really pleased that so many at Messiah have shared that they are praying for me; for Charis, for our leaders; for the mission and ministry of our congregation. I am so pleased that many pray faithfully as part of the Prayer Chain, and that some pray as Altar Prayer Ministers. The Bible promises that the Holy Spirit breathes life and power in us as we unite in prayer.

Another way the Holy Spirit works in our lives is when we get busy living our faith, putting our faith into action. The Bible tells us, like the Nike commercial of old, to "just do it." Yes, we

may fail sometimes yet Jesus tells us to brush the dust off and go on. It is when we step out in faith that the Holy Spirit works to empower and strengthen us.

The age old truth is that the one who teaches is always the one who learns the most. If we want to grow in the Spirit's power we need to test out our gifts and calling. To lead/teach that children's class; to take on that leadership position; to join that prayer team; to try to reach out and witness to that friend; to volunteer for a mission project.

It is true that those who venture out in their faith, those who take risks and try new challenges, they are the ones who really grow in their relationship with God. They are also the ones who often come to worship seeking and asking God for more power and strength.

They are the ones who really want to know the Bible; who really want the guidance and encouragement of prayer. Moving out in faith motivates growth and excitement. And how often, when a person looks back, do they wonder how they were able to do this ministry? The good news is that the Holy Spirit really works in us as we are open to his leading.

I heard the story one time of a church that had a terrible fire break out. As many church members came and were sadly watching the blaze, a woman saw a local business man standing nearby. He was a person who hadn't been to church for many years.

So she went over and said to this man quite curtly, "So, it took something like this to get you to come to church." He responded very quickly, "Well, you need to realize that this is the first time this church has ever been on fire."

Needless to say, certain churches have often not been on fire in God's Spirit. There has often been a lack of real joy and enthusiasm for Christ. There has often been a country club atmosphere, rather than an evangelical and mission focus.

The focus has often been on pleasing a few outspoken and complaining members of the church, rather than focusing on reaching out and meeting the needs of those outside the church. Churches have often gotten so stuck in worshipping certain traditions and worship structures that they may have neglected Jesus' great commission to go and make disciples of all nations.

The question however is, "Can these dry bones live?" Can renewal and new life come to individual churches; to Messiah Lutheran Church? Can people be so ignited and empowered in their faith and love for Jesus that they want to do everything they can to give it away? The answer of course is, "yes." Yes through the power of the Holy Spirit.

How about you today, my friend? Are you feeling spiritually dead? Is your faith lethargic and lacking any real life? Well, God is calling each of us including our church here at Messiah to discover this new life in Jesus. God wants to lead us through the valley of dry bones.

He wants to breathe into us his Spirit of joy and faith. God wants to set us on fire for him so we as his people, and as his church, may radiate life, hope and joy to all.