

Living Bones Bible Study
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Craig Alan Satterlee

At its best, this would be a 60-minute Bible study composed of four 15-minute parts. The leader could read or summarize the content of this Bible study to the entire group. Alternatively, congregation teams could read it together.

Our Need for Revival

We are so ready to claim our time as the first time, God's people—for us the church—needed reviving; the circumstances have never been more dire; or the need for revival has never been more urgent. This simply isn't true. Ezekiel's vision recalls for us the period of Israel's history known as the Babylonian Exile. In 597 BCE, the armies of Babylon forced the capitulation of the rebellious city Jerusalem and deported the Judean king and many Judean leaders to Babylon (2 Kings 24:10-16). Ten years later, in 587/6 BCE, after Jerusalem had rebelled again, the Babylonians razed Jerusalem and its temple and deported a second wave of Judean leaders. Among the first wave of the deported was the young Ezekiel, whom God later called in Babylon to the office of prophet. For those deportees forced to live in Babylon, the future seemed a black hole into which the people were destined to disappear. A century-and-a-half earlier, many citizens of Judah's sister kingdom, Israel, had been similarly deported, had lost their identity, and had faded into the mists of history--the so-called lost tribes of Israel. The exile was more than just a crisis of physical suffering and communal identity. It also resulted in a crisis of faith. The key symbols of Judean faith--Jerusalem, its temple, its people, and the Davidic monarchy--had been destroyed. In keeping with the ancient world's understanding of the divine, many exiled Judeans assumed that their God had been defeated by a stronger deity from Babylon. The people wondered if the Lord was truly lord and truly faithful.

Discuss in Congregation Teams: What does your congregation need to be revived from?

Use these questions to guide your conversation:

- When they write the history of your congregation, how will they describe this period of "Babylon Captivity" that brings on your need for revival?
- Toward the end of the oracle in Ezekiel 37:1-14, we hear the words of lament of the deported people: "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely" (v. 11). What would your congregation mean, were they to express their lament in these words?
- What symbols of your congregation's faith are challenged, weakened, or destroyed? *Bishop Satterlee names attendance, children in worship, cherished identity*
- What other deities do we fear are defeating our God? *Bishop Satterlee names Fear, Mammon, and Buildings.*

Ezekiel's Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones

Read aloud [Ezekiel 37:1–14](#)

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, “Prophecy 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 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, 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, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, 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 prophecy, 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.”

God transported Ezekiel—probably not literally, but in a vision—to a valley full of dry bones and directed him to speak to the bones. Ezekiel was to tell the bones that God would make breath enter the bones and they would come to life, just as in the creation of humanity when God breathed life into Adam ([Genesis 2:7](#)). Ezekiel obeyed, the bones came together, flesh developed, skin covered the flesh, breath entered the bodies, and they stood up.

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.

Dry Bones

The reference to "bones" is a colloquial way of referring to one's deepest self, or, in the case of "our bones," a way for the community to refer to its most essential self. We say, for example, we feel it in our bones.

Discuss in Congregation Teams: What are your congregation’s dry bones?

Use these questions to guide your conversation:

- Think of the REVIVE curriculum as the bones of a vital congregation. Which of your congregation's bones are the driest?
- Which of your congregation's bones are most in need of reviving?
- Which of your congregation's bones are most important to revive?
- Which of your congregation's bones should the Spirit revive first?

Ezekiel's Message of Deliverance

"I will put my spirit with you, and you shall live" (v. 14).

The Hebrew *xwr* (*ruach*) can mean "spirit" (as in God's spirit), "wind," and "breath." In this vision, the prophet plays on all three meanings. In v. 1, Ezekiel reports that the Lord's spirit showed him a vision of an entire valley filled with dry bones. The question is, "Can these bones live?" The key to the unfolding story, of course, is that to live, they need not only flesh, sinew, and skin. . . but also breath: "I will. . . put breath in you, and you shall live" (v. 6). Then, in the vision, sinew, flesh, and skin cover the bones, but there is no breath in them (v. 8). So, Ezekiel prophesies to the breath, "Come from the four winds, O Breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live" (v. 9). And "the breath came into them, and they lived" (v. 10).

"I will put my spirit with you, and you shall live" (v. 14). God's spirit is the key. With God's spirit, anything is possible. With God's spirit, there is life--and what Jesus called abundant life. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Jesus incorporates us in this life, both individually and as the church, when we are joined to his death and resurrection in the waters of baptism.

Discuss in Congregation Teams: How will you remain attentive to God's Spirit and Breath?

Use these questions to guide your conversation:

- One of the purposes of the REVIVE is to be breath for you as leaders. What breath do you most need and how can REVIVE breathe it into you?
- In whose voice do you hear God calling you to prophesy to the dry bones? How can you best be that voice for your congregation?
- Where do you experience God's Spirit breathing life into your congregation? How will you remain attentive to God's breath during the journey of REVIVE?
- What might the flesh, sinew, skin, and breath of Jesus' abundant life look like in your congregation?
- How are these different from the flesh, sinew, skin, and breath of growth or success?

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- How will you prepare yourselves and your congregation for the possibility that the body the Spirit revives is different from the body you hope for or expect?

¹ For this historical context, I am indebted to Rolf Jacobson, "Commentary on Ezekiel 37:1-1," *Working Preacher* https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=39