

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Hear the Word of the Lord

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Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-10

¹ The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³ He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "Sovereign Lord, you alone know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! ⁵ This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.'" ⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin 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 it, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

Transcript:

Holy Spirit, as we turn to your word, I ask that you help us breathe your life into us through your word. We ask that you would help us live again in your name. Amen. Well, there's a story about U.S. President Calvin Coolidge, back in the 1920s, one of our more insignificant Presidents, and his nickname was Silent Cow because he didn't talk a lot. And one time at a party, a woman said to him, "My friends bet me that I could not get you to say three words." And Silent Cow said, "You lose." Okay, God is not Calvin Coolidge, which is good news in all kinds of ways. Our God is the God who speaks and when he speaks his words bring dead things back to life. Dead friendships, dead school or career life, dead family dynamics, dead marriages, and even when things are going well but maybe you're wondering, "Gosh, is there more adventure,

more joy?" God's word breathes life into dead things and makes good things even better.

And last week, we talked about the Holy Spirit's role in that, but in this text that Jake just read, there's a second ingredient and you see it where Ezekiel says, "Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord," and then the bones come back to life. So it's the combination of the spirit of the Lord and the word of the Lord that breathes life into dead things and makes good things even better. The word of the Lord brings life. And this is the first thing we learn about God in the Bible. You get to the third sentence of the Bible and it says, "And God said," word of Lord, "'Let there be light' and there was light." And then it goes on and on and on and on and other lines like, "And God said, 'Let the water teem with living creatures.'" When God speaks, it brings life.

And not just a little life. Notice it says "teeming with living creatures." It doesn't say, "And God made a carp," and then he stopped creating because he wasn't so thrilled with the carp. No, God's word breathes life, overflowing, abundant teeming life into dead things and makes good things even better. And God speaks in lots of ways, and we've talked about that a lot. Just brief review, God speaks through scripture, the primary way God speaks. Thoughts that are not our thoughts. Other people, dreams, images in our mind, worship, sermons. God has been known to speak through sermons. It happens occasionally. Nudges he gives us to do certain things. And we discern whether or not it's God by asking, does this align with scripture, checking it with other people. But a big way that we can know whether or not it's God that I want to focus on today is, does it sound like the kind of thing that God revealed in Jesus says? Or does it sound like the kind of thing that I say or my culture says?

Because we all got this stuff where we have these beliefs and they're firmly held and we're like, "I know it's in the Bible somewhere." Really? I'm going to check that out. I've shared with you before that, when I did college ministry, one night I was preaching and I noticed the students all had their heads down like there were looking at something and I thought, "Oh man, this talk sucks. They're falling asleep and this is terrible." And then suddenly one of them yelled out, "Bingo!" So what my interns had done was they printed up what they called "Dudley Bingo Cards" with phrases that I use a lot in sermons. And so, as I was preaching, the students were checking the phrases off one at a time until one of them got a Dudley Bingo. So this week, while I was giving this sermon to my sermon review team, as I do every week, while I was giving this sermon to them, a college student and her dad, who are both part of the sermon review team, they made up what they call "a Bell Pres Dudley Bingo Card".

And as I was given the sermon, and here it is, right there, you maybe can't see that, but it has things like in that top row, "I have a friend who". Over here in the upper right hand corner, it mentions something negative about cats. And then there's that weird free space picture that I don't even know what that is. That's just weird. For the rest of your lives, whenever you hear someone say "I have a friend who" you are going to think about me, because it's the kind of thing I tend to say. And we can know if it's

God's voice or not by asking, "Is this the kind of thing God tends to say?" And so what are those things? What are things that God tends to say that brings life? And I'm going to just give you a few general categories and you ask the Holy Spirit to help you make a specific application for you.

First way the word of the Lord brings life is correction. The Bible says, "All scriptures God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." Nobody likes this verse because none of us want to be corrected. None of us want to be corrected, but in order for dead things to come back to life, God has to correct us if we are doing things that hurt us or hurt other people or hurt the culture in our school or in our workplace or in our church or in our country. The passage we read today is from Ezekiel chapter 37. Would you like to guess what God was saying for the first 36 chapters of Ezekiel? He's correcting and rebuking the Israelites because they were worshiping false gods and they were failing to do justice. They weren't caring for the poor, the immigrants, the oppressed and so God corrects them because it was wrecking their culture. So God corrects them to lead them to life.

See, sometimes the Bible is most helpful when it tells us what we do not want to hear. Sometimes the Bible is most helpful when it tells us what we do not want to hear because then it is correcting us, which leads us to do things that bring more life. And we are terrible at this. We don't want scripture to correct us. We're just all about, "I'm sure it's in the Bible somewhere what I believe. It's got to be there somewhere because I believe it therefore it must be in the Bible." We're terrible at letting scripture correct us and change us. We ignore the parts of the Bible that we don't like or we explain them away by saying things like, "Well, there's a lot of different ways you can interpret the Bible so who's to say?" Here's why that's a lame argument. First, it's almost always used as a cop out to wiggle out from something that we don't want to hear. But second, the problem with it is, yes, there are parts of the Bible that are a little gray and are hard to interpret.

But there are even more parts of the Bible that are absolutely crystal clear, and those are the ones that bug us. There are even more parts of the Bible that because God, like a good preacher, repeats his main points over and over and over again, hundreds of times. Worship only God. Forgive those who hurt you. Care for the poor and the oppressed. Keep sex inside marriage. Seek racial justice and reconciliation. Hundreds of times. Let's just start there and then we can talk about the stuff that maybe is a little more gray. I recently saw a social media post that said, "It's very hard to hear God's voice when you have decided in advance what he is going to say." That is so ouch. That is such an ouch statement. I remember one time a man came to talk to me about how unhappy he was in his marriage and according to him it was all his wife's fault. She was cold. She was critical.

I suggested that maybe he had a dog in that hunt too and maybe he should pray about that and read the Bible and that was the last time I saw him for a little over a year. But then he came back and he said, "My marriage is amazing now." And I said,

"Well, what happened?" And he said, "Well, I did, I started to read the Bible and I got to Romans 11 which said, 'Be devoted to one another in love, honor one another above yourselves,' and I realized I wasn't doing that for her. I expected her to meet my needs, but I wasn't meeting her needs. So I started to do that and it took a while but the ice began to thaw and now we have a fantastic marriage. Turns out the problem wasn't her after all. It was me." Scripture corrected him and it brought life. And if right now your response to that story is, "Man, I hope my spouse is hearing this, because they need to read the Bible and have that kind of moment," you have so missed my point.

So here's the action step for this week, wrestle with scripture. When you read or hear something from a friend or in a sermon from the Bible that you don't like, don't just dismiss it. Wrestle with it and say, "God, I don't like this. I don't want to hear this. But if it's true, if it's really biblical, then correct me. Correct my attitude. Correct my behavior. Correct my politics. Correct how I treat people. Correct me so I can live." Then the second way that the word of the Lord brings life is it speaks hope. The bones in this passage, they represent the Israelites who have been conquered by the Babylonians, taken into exile in Babylon, and everything in Ezekiel's chapter one through 36 that comes before this is God correcting Israel. But starting in chapter 37 and for the rest of the book, God begins to speak hope and says, "I'm going to take you back to Israel. You're getting out of here."

And you see this in the very first words of the text. It's like this turning point in the book and it says, "The hand of the Lord was on me." That is a word of hope, that even in your exile, even in your discouragement, even your problems, even when the worst things are happening, the hand of the Lord is still on you. He has not abandoned you and he never will.

Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

So for us, a second action step for us is to come in agreement with God's hope. God tells Ezekiel to preach to the dry bones that they're going to live. That is Ezekiel coming in agreement with the hope that God is speaking. And we come in agreement with all kinds of things every day that we hear. We come in agreement with the anger and fear in the news all the time. We come in agreement with the voices in our head that say we're not this enough or that enough. We come in agreement with the voices that say, "In order to be really someone, you need this kind of job and this kind of house and this kind of car." We come in agreement with all kind lines of toxic stuff. So it's time to let God's words speak hope into us. And instead of letting our problems preach to us, we start preaching God's hope to our problems about how big our God is, and that we may not know how, we may not know when, it may look different than we think it's going to, but somehow these drive bones are going to live.

I was talking to a guy this week, he's going through a really painful time in his life and he said, "I am learning to thank God in advance for the good he's going to bring out of this. I'm not thanking him for my circumstances because they suck, but I'm thanking

God for what he's going to do with my circumstances." That is preaching hope to dry bones. That's saying, "I don't understand how, but, God, I know you're going to make these things live. I don't care what my circumstances say. I don't care what other people say. Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord and live." And then the third way that the word of the Lord speaks life into us is encouragement. And the English word encourage means literally to put courage into. Ezekiel's name means God strengthens and God makes promises throughout scripture that encourage us such as, "I make all things new. I make all things work together for your good. You are more than conquerors through him who loved you," and when we hear the word of the Lord, it starts to bring us life.

I remember the first year I was doing college ministry, it wasn't going very well. Later, it went really well, but the first year wasn't going very well and I was just feeling like a failure. And one day, I was in church and my mind wandered during the sermon, happens to the best of us, and I was like, "God, I'm terrible at this. I should just go back to teaching. I'm a failure." And then I got one of those thoughts that wasn't mine that said, "Scott, where in the Bible do I ever call anyone a failure?" And I've read the Bible cover to cover dozens of times and I thought, "Nowhere, Lord." And he said, "Well then, whose voice are you listening to?" "Not yours?" And that put courage into me and allowed me to keep going so that I could then extend that courage to other people, because that's what God calls us to do to, to extend and pay forward the love and encouragement that he gives to us. And that's part of how God takes even good things and makes them even better.

And I've told you lots of stories of people whose lives were going awesome and God nudged them to do something and they did it and it made their lives more awesome and it made life more interesting. Like the story I told you a while back of a friend of mine who was in McDonald's and saw a dad and his kids and he just heard God say, "Go tell that man that he's a good dad." So my friend went over and said, "It's going to sound weird but I think God told me to tell you that he thinks you're a good dad." And the man started to cry and said, "I am a single father. Every day, I feel like a complete failure, but if God told you tell that to me, then I'm encouraged." The word of the Lord breathed life into that man through my friend and took my friend's ordinary trip to McDonald's and made it something more memorable. The word of the Lord brings life by correcting us, giving us hope, and encouraging us.

So practically speaking, how do we discern what God is really saying? Because it does get messed up sometimes. We've all heard stories of people who have done really stupid things and they've said, "Well, God said that I should do this." And you're like, "No, God just said no such thing to you." So we do mess it up sometimes. It does get muddled. [inaudible 00:14:14]. I have a friend who is a pastor and he did a wedding once where the scripture the couple picked to be read at their wedding was First John 4:18. It says, "Perfect love casts out fear." But when he got there, he noticed that the bulletin had left out the First John part and had printed just the Gospel of John 4:18, which is where Jesus says to the woman at the well, "You have had five husbands and

the one you have now is not your husband." Awkward text for a wedding, wouldn't you say? So we do mess it up. There are times where we don't hear the word of the word right, times we mess it up, times we don't know what God is actually saying.

So a couple of guidelines for discerning whether or not it's God talking to you, and you may want to take out your phone and take a picture of this slide, if you want, and then put it right back, and no checking Instagram, because I'm preaching and that's mean. So first, to discern, ask the Holy Spirit to help you. Never read the Bible without asking the Holy Spirit to speak to you through it, because the Bible comes more alive when you read it with the Spirit. Here in worship, don't just come in and plop yourself down. Ask God to speak to you through the songs, through the prayers, through the announcements. I know people whose lives have been changed by the announcements because they got involved in something that transformed them. Sermons are by necessity general, so always pray, "God, what's my specific application for this sermon?" Second, does what you heard God say align with scripture? So my friend in McDonald's, he had to respond to the nudge right away.

The reason he could do that is he knew the Bible well and knew that it aligned with scripture, which means you've got to know the Bible. So read it just a little bit at a time every day. Start with the New Testament. Join an all-in group. So many people say that they know scripture better because they're talking about it throughout the week in their all-in group. Third, get the council of other Christians. Discernment happens best in community. Four, is what I heard different than the kind of thing I normally think? Or does it sound like the kind of thing I normally think or that our culture says? Five, is it the kind of thing God tends to say in scripture? Six, is it quirky or counterintuitive? Now, that doesn't automatically mean that it's God, but a lot of times when God speaks, he says stuff to us that doesn't make sense at first. And then seven, and this is a big one, the closer it is to what you want to hear, the more suspicious you should be, that it was God talking and not you.

Now, sometimes God does tell us what we want to hear. That's true. Sometimes he tells us what we want to hear, but the more we want to hear it, the more likely it becomes that it's not God talking to us, it's us or it's our culture talking to us. And just, by the way, parenthetically, rule a thumb, if it involves mates, dates, or babies just don't go there. "God told me we're going to get married." Oh, far out. Mates, dates, babies, no. And then one last thing, get to know Jesus more because Jesus is the word of God made flesh and Jesus is everything the father wants to say. And the bottom line on this thing is love. The bottom line is love. Yes, God's word corrects us, and the word of the Lord sometimes is harsh and it can sound harsh sometimes. But if it's only harsh and it never gets to love, if it's only Ezekiel one through 36 but it never gets to 37, then it's not God, because the bottom line is always love. Even when he corrects, it's in love.

This summer, I got an email from a man in our church about a widow of a former coworker of his whose name is Sarah. And for 46 years, Sarah and her husband Richard did missionary work in countries where Christianity is illegal, starting way back

in the communist days of the Soviet Union and now in various Islamic republics where it's dangerous to be a Christian. And Sarah's husband died a few years ago, but she's still doing this missionary work. So this man forwarded to me an email that Sarah had sent to him about their adventures all having to do with the word of the Lord. So she said she and her husband used to buy or rent cars in Europe and then they would drive them into the Soviet Union with Bibles, the word of God, just praying they didn't get caught. Often, the guards didn't even see the Bibles. One time they were driving a Camaro and the guards in the Soviet Union were so fascinated by an American sports car that they wanted to sit in the driver's seat and look at the engine they never even bothered to look for the Bibles.

But one time they did get caught and they were accused of spying, the penalty for which was 10 years in a Soviet prison. So at the time of their trial, at that exact same time when they were at their trial, at that exact same time back in the United States in their home church, the pastor of their home church was giving the announcements and the Holy Spirit spoke to him, the word of the Lord, and said, "Sarah and Richard are in captivity, but as this church prays I am going to do a miracle and release them." So this church started to pray preaching hope to the dry bones. Meanwhile, back in Moscow, at the same time at the trial, the judge said to Sarah and Richard, "I don't know why but I suddenly feel very lenient towards you guys so I'm just going to let you go." The word of the Lord brought life. And they've seen thousands of people give their lives to Jesus in the Soviet Union, China, Islamic republics.

They had started four orphanages for kids without parents so that they could educate them and care for them and meet not just the spiritual needs of people but also the tangible, practical needs of people. And when her husband died, Sarah said, "I was devastated for over a year and all I could do is pray and read God's word because the word of the Lord brings life." And she said, "One day I was reading and I heard the word of the Lord say just to praise him for all the miracles we have seen over the years, the thousands of people that we have touched. So I obeyed." By the way, the word of the Lord doesn't do any good unless you obey. It doesn't bring life unless you do it. "So I obeyed and as I began to praise him after a long year of grief, the Lord began to heal my broken heart and my broken life." She did what the word of Lord said and the result was life.

And she said in an email that now she's headed off to the Ukraine where she's going to bring more Bibles, preach more Jesus, and help more people with their physical, tangible needs. That's who I want to be, adventurous, brave, making a difference in the world, but now I figure she's got to be in her 80s because of the word of the Lord that first called her and her husband to do missionary work in the first place. And when they were about to go to jail, their pastor heard the word of the Lord and prophesied to the bones and they were released. And when she was sad and in grief over the death of her husband, she heard the word of the Lord and the word of the Lord said, "Praise him," and began to heal her heart, because the word of the Lord brings life.

So this week, read the Bible. Pray. Listen. Say, "God, I need to hear from you. Word of God, speak. Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord and live." So Holy Spirit, we need to hear you. We need to hear your voice. We need it every day. So Lord, as we read scripture, as we pray, speak to us, speak to us through the Bible, through each other, through music, through thoughts. Speak to us your word that brings life and then help us to obey it and do it so that we live and we become the people you made us to be and so that we can make a difference in your world. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions

Read Ezekiel 37:1-10 again and answer the below questions with your friends, family or All In small group.

Ice Breaker Question:

- What is one thing you really like about where you live?

Opening Questions:

- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions – *Together read Ezekiel 37:1-10 again and discuss the following:*

- As you hear this passage again, what stands out? Are you drawn to different verses in particular?
- What are some of the things that continue to resonate for you about what this passage teaches us about God and about people?

Sermon Reflection Questions – *Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:*

- How frequently do you feel like you hear God speak to you? How do you know it's God?
- Are there things you could do that would help you hear God's voice more frequently?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week?
- Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer:

Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.