

# Down into the Valley of Bones

Hespeler, March 22, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Fifth Sunday in Lent  
Ezekiel 37:1-14, Psalm 130, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-45

**T**he hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the Shajareh Tayyebah girls' elementary school in Minab, Southern Iran. Or at least, it set me down in the middle of what was left of it. And there really wasn't much left of it.

As I walked around the place, I saw that it was full of rubble, burned schoolbooks and clothing. I also saw the burnt-out casings of the three Tomahawk missiles that had struck the place.

But what I saw most of all were the bones – bones that I do not want to describe because I cannot remember them without feeling sick.

Despite all my revulsion, the LORD led me around all of them and made me look at them. For somewhere between 168 and 180 people had died there. Most of them had been young girls. So, yes, there were very many bones lying in that place, and they were very dry.

## A Question About International Affairs

And the LORD said to me, “**Mortal, can these bones live?**” And I knew that that was a very difficult question, because it was not just a question about those poor girls.

It was a question about the state of international relations, which had functioned in a certain way ever since the end of the Second World War.

It was a system that had never been perfect, and had hardly prevented the worst of atrocities. Nevertheless, it had provided a rules-based order. There had been rules about how war was conducted and, if they weren't always followed, at least everyone pretended to follow them, and that made things more predictable.

## A Broken Order

But I knew that this blast had happened on the first day of a war that had not been declared and for which no one had even given a reason – at least not a reason that they hadn't contradicted with another reason the next day. So, the question about the bones was also a question about whether there was a way back to a predictable world order. Or had everything simply fallen apart permanently?

## Humanity and AI

But, more than that, it was a question about humanity. I knew, you see, that this school had not been struck by accident; it had been a deliberately chosen target.

How the target had been chosen, though, especially troubled me. Apparently, a huge database of dangerous military targets had been fed into targeting system created by Palantir, which was powered by Claude. Claude is the Artificial Intelligence made by Anthropic.



So, it seems that an AI chatbot sorted through all of these potential targets and selected the elementary school as a high priority. This was likely because the school had been on land that had been part of a military facility about a decade ago.

So, as I stood on those ruins, I could not help but wonder whether, if human beings had bothered to check the chatbot's recommendations, they would have noticed that its intelligence was out of date.

## Any Way Back?

So, the question of whether these bones could live was also a question about whether there was any way back from the world that we are building, or whether we will simply hand everything over to Artificial Intelligence, including the power of life and death.

So, as I stood there in the ruins of that place, I knew that I could not answer the question. And so, I turned to the LORD in despair and said, "O Lord GOD, I hope you know because I certainly don't."

## Rushing to the End

The story of Ezekiel in the valley of the dry bones is one of those stories that I think we hurry through too quickly. It is like what we do every year at Easter. No one wants to spend their time thinking of all the sadness and sorrow of Good Friday; we are in a rush to get to the victory of Easter.

In the same way, we read this story of Ezekiel, and we want to rush to the end and start singing about Dem Dry Bones, and how "*The foot bone connected to the leg bone, the leg bone connected to the knee bone, The knee bone connected to the thigh bone,*" and so on.

But, just like Easter means nothing without Good Friday, this story of Ezekiel loses all of its meaning if we don't spend some time in that disturbing valley filled with dead dry bones before we start singing about raising them bones up.

## Ezekiel's Mood

And the valley of bones that Ezekiel saw was not just any valley of bones. I'm not sure how much of it was something that he actually saw and how much of it was a vision. It probably doesn't matter. Whatever he experienced, Ezekiel was seeing it because he was totally dispirited by recent historical events.

Ezekiel was depressed, and probably clinically depressed, because of the devastating defeat of the people of Judah by the armies of Babylon. The Babylonians had literally slaughtered the Judeans in huge numbers and left their bodies to rot in a particular valley. The bones that Ezekiel saw (whether in a vision or reality) were the bones of his countrymen. It was a devastating sight.

And so, the question that came to him, the question of whether the bones could live, was not just a question about the possibility of resurrection for the dead. It was a question about the possibility of there being a future for his people.

## Spending Time in the Valley

And, for me, that means that you have to spend some time in a valley full of bones before you can really understand what Ezekiel's vision is about. And the most recent valley of bones that I have had to deal with is that elementary girl's school in Iran. What happened there has shaken so many of the things that I had assumed about this world and how it is supposed to work.

But that is hardly the only example of such disturbing events. For you, maybe, the valley of bones is found on the plains of Gaza, where nobody knows how many children have died in the famine and bombing campaign over the last few years. Or we could talk about the valley of bones that is Ukraine. We could talk about the streets of Minneapolis.

There are many signs around us that something is going on in this world that is disturbing and frightening, and it makes us wonder whether we will be able to find ourselves a way back to a world that makes sense anymore.

## About Feelings

This is mostly about feelings and not logic. It was not as if Ezekiel had done an analysis of the political situation in the ancient Near East and come to the rational conclusion that the Babylonian Government had committed a violation of the rules-based order. He had had a look at recent events and it made him feel as if his world was falling apart.

We can disagree about matters of national and international policy. We can argue that this government or that government has only done what they had to do. I'm sure we could all make some reasonable points on such questions. But the valley of bones is not about such reasonable arguments. It is about what the events make us feel. And as I talk to a lot of people today, they are all feeling a lot like Ezekiel.

## Prophetic Speech

But here is the hope in this story. Ezekiel did not leave that valley that day an emotional basket case. And why not? Because once God had taken him into that valley, God gave Ezekiel something to do. **"Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.'"**

Speaking the word of the LORD is the job of prophets. They are called to go into any situation – whether it be a bombed-out classroom or an abandoned battlefield – and declare the truth about it.

People (and especially powerful people) hated the prophets because they never sugar-coated the truths they proclaimed. They certainly didn't use diplomatic language. To speak the word of the LORD was to speak the kind of truth that people didn't want to hear.

## Speaking the Word of the LORD

And I do believe that God is calling on faithful disciples to speak the word of the LORD in the same way today. That may mean speaking honestly about the foolishness of certain international policies rather than being sycophants who tell their leaders how brilliant they are. That may mean calling out things like racism, genocide and authoritarianism when they are undeniably present.

Speaking such a word is never easy, but Ezekiel's vision makes it clear that there is no way out of the valley of bones until we dare to do that. It is only after he has the courage to prophesy to the bones – to prophesy to the truth of the situation – that something finally happens.

## New Possibilities and Strength

**“So I prophesied as I had been commanded, and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.”** So you see, once we are willing to speak the truth about the situation, it becomes possible to start to rebuild, to set up a new skeletal framework on which we can build a better world.

**“I looked,”** Ezekiel goes on, **“and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them.”** The flesh and the sinews (which are connected to the muscles) speak to the possibility of action. You have strength within you, God is showing Ezekiel, to act for peace, and hope and a more just world.

## The Breath

Yet, despite this, Ezekiel notes that there is still something missing. **“But there was no breath in them.”** Breath, in Ancient Hebrew, is the same word as wind. It is also the same word as spirit. Breath, in ancient thinking, was the one thing that made the difference between life and death. When God creates Adam, for example, God first shapes him and then breathes life into him.

But breath, which is also spirit, means much more than that. It is whatever gives our life meaning and purpose. And, in many ways, I think that it is the lack of such spirit that is killing us today.

All of the discouraging events that are taking place – our own personal valleys of bones – seem to be constantly giving us all the message that we have no agency. We are simply pawns in the big game being played by the presidents and oligarchs. We need a new spirit to blow through us.

**“Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.”**

## Valley of Bones Events

The world is a disturbing place these days. That is a message that I constantly get when I talk to people. And there are certain events that I would call “valley of bones events” that seem to get through to us and bring that home to us in powerful ways. The bombing of an elementary school did that for me recently.

And do you know what the people who think they are in charge want you to do when you feel like that? They want you to be cynical. They want you to give up and go along with what they say has to happen to keep you safe.

But the wind of God is there. It is ready to be summoned from the four corners of the earth and blow into the hearts of God's people. That is the job of the prophets among us – those who are empowered by God to speak the truth to the situation in which we find ourselves.

We don't have to give in to the cynicism and powerlessness of the present age. That is the good news that we can all find, even if it feels as if we have stumbled into a valley full of bones on our way to finding it.