
Choose God and Live

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 22 March 2026

Ezekiel 37:1-14 • John 11:17-45



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

We have this glorious reading today about the dry bones. It reads like a script for a horror movie, with great special effects: the skeletons coming together, the muscle and skin covering them, and life returning. Steven Spielberg would do it very effectively (although I'm probably dating myself by using his name — there was a movie in the 1950s called "Jason and the Argonauts" which had our hero attacked by an army of skeletons — very cool special effects for its time — but I digress). It is a clear metaphor for the spiritual death of the people of Israel. God himself tells us that "the people of Israel are like dead bones" (v.11). Their spiritual death lies in their failure to trust God, time after time. Ezekiel was writing during a period of frequent war between Israel and the surrounding kingdoms. Most of the kings of Israel and Judah did not follow God's rule, and they and the people suffered for it. Spiritual death became physical death, as God empowered their enemies to defeat them.

Yet God is in the end merciful, and will save his people and again love them, if they turn to him. This was always Ezekiel's message: turn from your sin and

your selfishness, stop thinking that you can lead your own lives without God, and God will turn back to you in love. The ancient Israelites tested the patience of God with their altars to idols and disregard of the proper temple worship. They effectively cut God out of their lives and did whatever they wanted.

We can't help but think about our own time. So many Christians have fallen away from regular worship and prayer. So many people worship wealth and power and don't think about God, or even believe in him. God doesn't seem to act as he used to, to bring his people to account and execute justice in their lives.

But I believe we shouldn't think in terms of executing justice. God will execute justice as he sees fit, but I prefer to think in terms of life. When we are in line with God's desires and plans for us, we have more life. Our human life and our eternal life combine. We are designed to be God's people, and fighting God's will for us sets up stress within us; and we all know that stress shortens our lives. It is like using a tool for a purpose it wasn't designed for. In a moment of impatience, I might reach for a big wrench to hammer in a nail, but it isn't meant for that. It won't do a very good job of driving the nail and it might damage the wrench. Or I might use the wrong size Phillips screwdriver to drive a screw, but I'd probably end up stripping the head, and the screw would be stuck. Our minds, our souls, and our bodies are designed by God to work best when we live as God desires. If we do other things with our lives, things that are against God's will, or we simply try to leave God out of the picture, it is we who suffer.

Imagine a meter somewhere on your body measuring how much life is in you. You want it to point to infinite, eternal life, right? Or think about all those warnings you read about how each pack of cigarettes smoked or each bottle of alcohol you drink takes a month off your life. Well, what about each time you forget to pray, or each time you take God for granted, and don't thank him for the blessings he give you? I think those things also take away a little bit of your life in much the same way.

Sure, this is all a metaphor. But it has real world implications. The dry bones in the desert attest to that. As Moses told the people of Israel:

If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous ... Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days. (Deuteronomy 30:16,19,20)

So when we follow Christ and try our best to imitate him, we do better. We choose life. It is healthier — it leads to more life. And of course it leads to eternal life.

I had a very affirming experience yesterday when I took a wedding at All Saints. It was for a Samoan couple. They were not kids — they'd already been together for some years and had children. But they both felt that actually getting married is a very positive step. It is assuredly what God wanted them to do. It was a Christian wedding — I don't do any other kind — and their own pastor was present as well. He blessed them and preached a bit on the meaning of marriage, emphasising the connection between man and woman as similar to the bond between Jesus and the church. This is an old comparison from the Bible. And in all the blessings that he and the bride's mother and I gave, the central idea was long life in obedience to God's will. Choose God and live.

And the happiness and cheering in the church as I pronounced them husband and wife! And the dancing down the aisle as the bridal party recessed — everyone took part. It was a joyous celebration of life and trust in God, and I'm sure Jesus rejoiced right along with us.

That energy was God-given, and it was the same energy that brought life back to those dry bones, and to Lazarus when Jesus raised him from the dead, and to Jesus when God raised him from the dead. Choose God and live, and live abundantly. That is the great blessing that God brings us. So let us celebrate our lives in Christ. Amen.