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inside

bOOnes dry
dancing

resurrecting
your spiritual passion

Tony Evans



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Tony Evans

DRY BONES DANCING

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Contents

PART I

From Deadness to Dancing

1. Down in the Valley	7
2. There's a Reason for This	21
3. When the Spirit's Wind Blows	37
4. Your Resurrection	51

PART II

Deepening Your Spiritual Passion

5. Are You Hungry?	65
6. Are You Asking?	79
7. Are You Drawing Near?	91
8. Are You Paying the Price?	103
9. Are You Enduring?	121
10. Are You Worshiping?	141
11. Are You Proclaiming?	157
12. A Path for Dancing	171
Study & Discussion Guide	177



PART I

FrOm
Deadness to
Dancing

DOWN in the Valley

■ One day someone much like you or me paused long enough to look back on his life and land upon this realization:

First I was dying to finish high school and start college.
 Then I was dying to finish college and start my career.
 Then I was dying to get married and have children.
 Then I was dying for my children to grow up and get out.
 Then I was dying to retire.
 And now, I'm just dying...and suddenly I realize I've forgotten to live.

Could that be the road you're driving down? Have you often found yourself waiting and hoping and looking for that "next thing" that could fill the vacuum in your life?

So many of God's people are like that. So many often feel stranded in a desert of hopelessness and emptiness. It's true today...and it was especially true at one particular moment in history that can teach us so much when we look back and reflect carefully upon it. In that moment, God's people were "dying" in

the most tragic desperation conceivable.

But in their despair, God had a spiritual miracle to show them. And for your edification and mine, He has placed a record of that miracle in His Book. With the eyes of our hearts focused on that account, I want to quickly take you back with me to that amazing moment in that amazing place so that we can learn all we can.

I want to take us there to help us comprehend the degree of despondency His people were then experiencing (and into which we ourselves can often sink).

I want to take us there to discover how God invaded that place of despair in such a powerful and unforgettable way.

I want to take us there because the promise that almighty God announced on that occasion and in that location is for all His people for all time—and that means you and me, right now.

DISASTER AREA

It was a scene like nothing Hollywood ever imagined.

In fact, only the Spirit of God Himself could fully imagine it. And only in the Spirit of God could it be witnessed firsthand by any human being. That's exactly what happened to the prophet Ezekiel in the passage we're about to penetrate. So let's consider carefully every detail in the big picture God gave him.

Only the Spirit of God Himself
could fully imagine it.



“The hand of the LORD was upon me,” the prophet tells us, “and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD” (Ezekiel 37:1). This was a supernatural encounter. It was a supernatural intervention into the life of a natural man. God’s hand took hold of Ezekiel and lifted him above his everyday existence, outside his normal routine, and beyond his natural senses. What he experienced was a vision, yet because it came straight from the Spirit of God, it reflected a reality more real even than the physical reality we perceive around us.

God’s hand carried off this man “in the Spirit.” And what was their destination?

Ezekiel goes on to tell us exactly where he was taken and what he observed. He says that the Lord “set me down in the middle of the valley” (v. 1).

Ezekiel had been in such a place before. This same Hebrew word for “valley” is identical to the term used earlier in Ezekiel’s book for a broad stretch of land where the Lord Himself had once instructed Ezekiel to go and meet Him (3:22–23; 8:4). On that occasion, when the prophet obeyed and went there in solitude, he saw in that place “the glory of the LORD” with such awesomeness that he fell to his face.

Perhaps in this new spiritual vision Ezekiel was transported to the very same expanse of land where he’d previously fallen to the ground in the presence of God’s holy light. But if so, the sight now before him was something different in the extreme from his earlier encounter.

Ezekiel glanced all around him at this broad valley where the Lord had placed him and saw that “it was full of bones” (37:1). Not just piles of bones here and there, but a valley full of them.

Like a modern-day public official being flown in a helicopter

over a disaster area, Ezekiel was given the full tour of this strange and gruesome sight. The Lord allowed him a careful inspection of this vast accumulation of human skeletal remains: “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” (v. 2).

Not just several bones, but “*very many*.” Skulls and shoulder blades, kneecaps and ribs, femurs and vertebrae, hipbones and anklebones and fingerbones, all by the thousands.

And not just drab or stale, but “*very dry*”—as if they’d all been lying out there on public display, dead and exposed and baking in the hot sun for a long, long time.

God had a particular command to give Ezekiel in regard to these parched and brittle bones, and very shortly He would also provide him with a quite detailed explanation about them. But first God had a probing question to ask him, just as He sometimes has a few piercing questions for you and me to address before He’s ready to reveal to us what He wants us to do or to know.

BIGGER THAN ME

Here was His question. The Lord God asked Ezekiel, “Son of man, can these bones live?” (37:3).

Ezekiel had just surveyed this vast and bizarre scene. He could not escape the conclusion that life and vitality were nonexistent in these bones. Bones, of course, are organic formations, developing only as part of some living creature; where there are bones, then of necessity there once was life. But in these dry relics filling the valley before Ezekiel’s eyes, that life was long gone.

Could it be restored? Could there be life again where life had

totally departed? Can strength and movement and energy and awareness and responsiveness somehow reappear in those who are so utterly dead that their bodies have decayed away, leaving nothing but bones—and even those very bones are disconnected and bleached and dry?

Is such a miracle possible?

God wanted to hear Ezekiel's answer, just as He sometimes wants us to carefully assess the true potential in whatever difficult situation lies before us. Perhaps we've concluded that a way out or a remedy or a resolution is impossible. Our condition or our circumstances seem hopeless. But is that really the case?

God was challenging Ezekiel to carefully evaluate the situation before him. He required a response, so of course Ezekiel gave Him one: "And I answered, 'O Lord GOD, you know'" (37:3).

When people say, "God only knows," it's the same as admitting that they themselves *don't* know. Ezekiel was no fool. He realized he didn't possess the answer to God's question. He was confessing, "Lord God, this is bigger than me. I myself cannot make these bones live again, and I don't know anyone else who can either. Only You know whether these bones could ever live again."

We so often offer to God our human assessment of the problem, along with our human solution to it. Ezekiel didn't do that. He wanted only God's assessment, and he wanted only God's solution.

"God, I don't know...but *You do.*"

| s such a miracle possible?



Ezekiel recognized impossibility when he saw it...but he did not forget that God is the God of the impossible.

FACING UP TO REALITY

Ezekiel must have sensed already who these bones represented. Even if he hadn't, God soon made the meaning clear: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel" (37:11).

So this was the devastating reality: God's people were nothing more than a valley-full of wretched bones, pathetic and passionless and useless. This was the accurate depiction of their spiritual condition. Like dry-roasted, disconnected skeletal fragments, and nothing more. Only bones that could not effectively walk or run or work. Bones that definitely were incapable of dancing and celebration.

That was the deepest reality among the people of God.

What would you and I see today if God were to grant us a personal vision of the true reality of our own spiritual condition? Or our family's spiritual condition? Our church's? Our nation's? What exactly would be in that picture? What would our valley be filled with?

Ezekiel didn't have to wonder. God gave him the clear image. And it showed that, spiritually speaking, God's people were missing something very critical—*life*. The "whole house of Israel" was this way, the entire nation. They were all dead and dry.

God's people were missing something very critical.



Their miserable inner condition was just as bleak as their outward circumstances. At this point in history, the Jews had been exiled from their homeland of Israel, and Jerusalem had recently been entirely destroyed. Ezekiel himself was in Babylon with his fellow captives. And in their captivity, they were suffering from an extreme case of spiritual emptiness and dryness and despair. God reminded His prophet of the people's cries and groans: "Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off'" (v. II). Physically they felt inwardly drained of vitality because spiritually and mentally and emotionally they were without any hope.

They felt "cut off"—severed from life and vitality as well as from their sense of community. Each one felt inwardly disjointed, confused, and disconnected from one another. Their condition was perfectly captured in that vision of the valley of dry bones Ezekiel observed—for there's no one to go to for help when the person next to you is just as dead and dry as you are.

Spiritual dryness and dejection and disconnectedness had become a way of life for them. It was the norm—as it is so often with too many of us. And it hangs on for so long that we begin to lose hope of ever experiencing anything different.

But whenever this is true, God shows us how to change it. He's ready and eager to bring a new reality into existence for us.

ACTION TIME

For Ezekiel, in that valley of dried-up bones, the moment for action had come. God was going to perform a miracle, and He was going to use Ezekiel to accomplish it.

To bring about this miracle, God was simply going to speak His Word—His life-giving Word, His Word that is living and active and sharper than a two-edged sword, His Word that pierces deeply into our innermost delineation of soul and spirit and of joint and marrow and discerns there our hearts' every thought and motive (Hebrews 4:12).

And God was going to speak this Word through His prophet Ezekiel—"Prophesy over these bones," God commanded him, "and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD" (37:4).

Then He gave Ezekiel a promise to announce for all God's people:

"Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 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." (vv. 5-6)

God was promising absolutely everything that these bones needed to become living, active beings. First and most importantly, He promised life-sustaining breath (notice how He mentioned it twice.) He also promised tendons, and He promised muscle, and He promised skin. These bones would be completely restored into living, breathing, active creatures, and more than that, they would be restored in their knowledge of the Lord God.

Now He was going to prove the answer.



“Can these bones live?”—that’s what God had asked Ezekiel. Now He was going to prove and demonstrate the answer.

Ezekiel did exactly what he was told. “So I prophesied as I was commanded” (v. 7). He spoke aloud to those bones and gave them God’s message.

God was faithful to His promise. “And as I prophesied,” Ezekiel says, “there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone” (v. 7). These bones had been scattered and jumbled like puzzle pieces thrown in a box. But at God’s command, every bone attached to another, linking to other bones exactly where it needed to. Where there’d been disconnection and chaos before, now there was order and shape and framework. It happened with a great sound, with countless clackings of bone to bone.

Ezekiel could now see full human skeletons, thousands of them, a valley full of them. Then more happened: “And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them” (v. 8). From the *inside out* these skeletons were transformed into full-formed human bodies, all through the simple medium of God’s Word. The bones took on tendons; the tendons took on muscle; the muscle took on skin.

STILL MISSING: LIFE

Yet something still was missing, as Ezekiel quickly noticed: “But there was no breath in them” (37:8).

God had promised breath...but as yet there was none. There was body and form, there was *potential* movement and action and responsiveness—but not yet actual life.

In this vision God was giving to Ezekiel and to us, He placed great emphasis upon life-giving breath. In the Hebrew way of thinking, the concepts of “breath” and “wind” and “spirit” are so closely linked that the same Hebrew word is used for all three. That word is *ruach*, and it’s used four times in the sentence God spoke next to Ezekiel: “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, 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” (v. 9).

Once again, the prophet obeyed: “So I prophesied as he commanded me...”

Once again, God was faithful to His Word: “...and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army” (v. 10).

Where Ezekiel had seen before a valley filled with wasted, wretched bones, now he looked out upon the awesome sight of a vast and mighty host of living, breathing soldiers ready to do battle for the Lord.

POWER PROMISE

In that awesome moment for Ezekiel, God took the opportunity to preach His promise even more. He was sending the prophet back to speak again to the people, so at the close of this vision He gave him a powerful message to carry with him.

It was a promise all about *resurrection* and *restoration*:

“Therefore prophesy, 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. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people.” (37:12-13)

It was also a promise of true *life* from God’s *Spirit*: “And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live” (v. 14).

And it was also a promise about *knowing* God and experiencing His *faithfulness*: “Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD” (v. 14). In their day of despair, God was focusing their spiritual eyes on a brighter tomorrow when their relationship with Him would be better than ever: “When this thing is turned around, you’ll have the true knowledge of God. When this thing is turned around, there’ll be no doubt about who God is. When this thing is turned around, there’ll be no question that there’s only One who sits on the throne. You’ll discover that I alone am your sufficiency to make dry bones live again and to keep them alive.”

That’s God’s message for us as well. That’s His good news for you and me. He has a supernatural turnaround awaiting us. He has a resurrection and a restoration and a spiritual renewal that will ultimately bring us more intimate knowledge of Himself.

When this thing is turned around, you’ll have the true knowledge of God.



FACING THE DESPERATION

You may be despondent because dryness and passionlessness have become a way of life, and you're short on hope that it could ever change. You're dehydrating down in your valley, and your bones are sucked dry. There's been a severe loss of life—in your spirit or your mentality, or in your marriage or your family, or in your ministry or your church, or in some endeavor or concern that once was alive for you. But now the fire and the passion are gone.

Being honest, you have to admit to God, “Only You know whether this situation can be fixed. I don't have an answer, and if You're asking me how to make this thing live again, I have to say that only You know, because I have no clue.”

As you face such desperation, the good news is that you don't have to give up. You don't have to run away. No matter how dry and hopeless you are, *these bones can live again*. These bones can thrive again. These bones can rejoice again. These bones can dance again because God is extending to you His promise of the Spirit's power, His promise of resurrection power, His promise of a great awakening. He's saying again, “I'll raise you from your grave.”

A miracle is what you need, and a miracle is what He promises—a miracle of spiritual renewal in the place where all hope has been discarded.

A man in our community named Billy Trailor goes around to junkyards and construction sites and back alleys to look over stuff that other people have discarded as useless and good for nothing. Billy looks at that junk as an opportunity for a resurrection. He selects the discarded items he wants and takes them to his garage, where he carefully works to fashion them into objects of contemporary art. Some of them he has sold for thousands of dollars.

Something that was once perceived as being worth nothing can instead be put on display at a gallery—all because Billy turns trash into treasure. He creates miracles out of junk. He recognizes that the stuff others discard is really a miracle waiting to happen.

God has a miracle of renewal waiting to happen for you. Do you want to get ready for it? Do you want to know how to receive the spiritual renewal God promises?

That's what the rest of this book is all about.



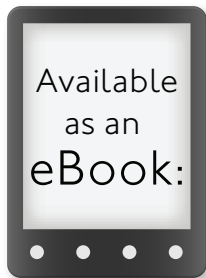
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