

CONVENTION SERMON: KIE BOWMAN

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CAN THESE BONES LIVE?

I want to ask you a strange question. Do you like to talk about skeletons? Probably not. In fact, you may think that is an extremely strange question to ask at a moment like this and I don't disagree with you. In October 1966, as eleven-year-old Sandy Blampied ran toward the school bus, she ran back to hug her mother goodbye and said "Momma, I'll see you later, okay?" But Sandy Blampied never saw her mother again. As soon as Sandy got on the bus and left for school, her mother, Louise Pietrewicz, got in her car and left, traveling to the bank, emptying out her bank account of \$1,200, and took off with a man named William. Louise was in a very unhappy and abusive marriage and had started an affair with William, a married man in the community. Nobody ever saw Louise again. At first police thought she had abandoned her family; but her family knew she was too much of a loving mother to abandon them. Soon she was considered a missing person, but because there was no body or evidence of foul play, and even after questioning William, her married boyfriend, there was no reason to make any arrest in the disappearance of Louise Pietrewicz. Before long, people in the little community around Long Island forgot all about Louise, everyone except Sandy. Ms. Pietrewicz's case went into the cold cases file and laid there, forgotten, for fifty years. Last year, however, investigators reopened the case and when they did, got a strange tip from a strange source – the widow of William. After Louise's disappearance, William had developed serious psychological issues and his friends said he wandered around New York City talking to himself for the last few years of his life. William's widow shared a strange story and a dark secret with the investigators. She had always believed that there was a body buried in the basement of the house where they had lived in 1966. Investigators went into that house and using ground penetrating sonar they dug through five inches of concrete and four feet of dirt and found a skeleton. DNA later confirmed that it was in fact the skeletal remains of Louise Pietrewicz. When Sandy, now in her 60s, discovered that her mother had been found as a skeleton underground, the image couldn't leave her mind. She kept repeating over and over again, "I can't believe it! That was my mother! That was my mother!" There is something, my brothers and sisters, extremely unsettling about the thought of human skeletal remains.

If you think it's almost inappropriate that I'm mentioning this here today and it makes you just a little uneasy that one skeleton is being discussed, can you imagine what the prophet Ezekiel must have thought when God led him out into a valley of dry skeletal remains? I want us to look at the question God asked that prophet 2,600 years ago when he said, "Can these bones live?" The Bible says in Ezekiel 37:1-14:

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. 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. And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. 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."

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. 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. Then he said to me, "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." 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. 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.' 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. 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."

Think about that question, "can these bones live?" It's a powerful question. It's a provocative question. It's a penetrating question. But brothers and sisters, it's also a painful question. Ezekiel was a priest which means he had spent his entire life ministering around the things of God in His temple. In 597 BC, however, he was captured as a prisoner of war and taken to a pagan culture; ten years later he got word that the temple had been destroyed. This meant that everything he'd ever prayed about, hoped for, or worked for was evaporated in the winds of war. In this passage, God has led him to the ultimate example of his shattered hopes and the desecration and devastation of his national dreams – an army of skeletons. It was a kind of "Arlington National Cemetery of Israel" except it didn't have any beautiful white markers or memorials honoring the fallen. Instead, this once great army was lying scattered on the desert floor – an army lying in death, in disgrace, and make no mistake, it was an army lying in defeat. This message came to the prophet Ezekiel 2,600 years ago as a message of hope, life, and resurrection to a hopeless people. This message is still a message of hope and life to your situation because our God is a God of life and of resurrection and anything that looks dead to you may be the next thing God raises back to life. In O.S. Hawkins' book *Revive Us Again*, he says, "After 2,000 years of the church's ministry and outreach, her urgent necessity is revival – to live again." This ancient vision given to this faithful prophet has a word of hope and life to you and me as brothers and sisters here today in the twenty-first century.

I want us to notice that **God wants bones to live again so he calls us to speak life.** Look at verses 3-5, "And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live." I wonder if you heard Robby Gallaty earlier today as he presented the report of the Disciple-Making Task Force. He talked about how the most important thing we can do to disciple our people is to engage them in the Word of God. Earlier this year, I read one of Dr. Gallaty's books on discipleship and he wrote, "As a Christian, your relationship with God and your relationship to the Bible are inseparable." Here's what I notice in this passage of Scripture – God told the prophet to preach, prophesy, and declare the Word of the Lord. How many have heard the expression, "I've got some good news and some bad news." The bad news for Ezekiel was that he was a priest and was being called in a vision to walk around the dead bodies of his own people; but the good news is that God can raise the dead!

Today, your bad news may be a little different than that. Let me speak to you from a pastor's heart. For a lot of pastors, pastor's wives, and ministers, your bad news may be that your ministry is struggling. I know exactly what it feels like to come to a Convention and get excited as you hear all these reports and phenomenal preachers talk about all the good things God is doing around the country, but then go home and face the reality of what you and I sometimes face in ministry. It's not easy. Some of you may be struggling with where we are as a Convention. We've heard some sobering reports. Yes, we believe in the Good News. Yes, we're optimistic. But it's going to be an uphill battle and we all know it. Can I just speak candidly for a moment? Some of us may be struggling today with marriages that are hanging by a cobweb. They may feel lifeless and hopeless. Maybe somebody in this room has a prodigal that you raised right, but now they're far from God and in the far country and you don't know when they'll ever come home. Maybe you've got too much month at the end of your money. Maybe the doctor has given you the most discouraging news you've ever heard about yourself or a loved one. Maybe you're struggling with a personal temptation that, if you were honest, you would have to admit you failed more often than you have succeeded. It may feel like there's just a lot of dry bones around your life. Here's your good news! God specializes in raising the dead! Nothing is impossible with God. Anything God has ever done before, He can do again. Anything God has ever done anywhere, He can do here. Anything God's ever done with anyone, He can do with you. Our God says, "I will raise you from your graves and you will live again!"

What was God's solution to this graveyard problem? He says in verse 4, "*Prophesy over these bones.*" Can I talk to some preachers for a minute? *Prophesy over bones?! I don't say this irreverently, but that's odd advice and strange counsel.* They don't have any brains, they don't have a heart, and they don't even have ears. Yet God says, "Preach to the ones who will not and cannot hear." I've got to be honest, every preacher in this room has felt like they've been in front of that congregation at least once in their lives, am I right? Notice that God's solution to the biggest problem imaginable, a valley of dry bones, was pretty simple – declare the Word of the Lord to a culture that will not hear or cannot hear and just keep declaring the mighty works of our sovereign God who says, "I will give you life! I raise the dead!" Listen, it's not unusual to preach the Word to those who can't hear. It's not unusual to preach the Word to those who refuse to understand. Think about it, brother, half of your congregation can't tell the difference between "yanny" and "laurel," and yet God still raises the dead through the Word of the Lord! His solution for raising the dead has always been "I am the Lord God, I will raise you from your graves and give you life." This is no different than what happened in John 6, when Jesus' disciples left him and He turned to the few that were left and said, "*Will you also go away?*" They responded, "*To whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of life.*"

Years ago I was in a benevolence room, helping people and sharing the gospel. There was a young lady there getting some baby items. I went over to share the gospel with her while she gathered the things she needed for her baby. As I began to talk to her, I realized she did not speak English and I didn't speak enough Spanish to carry on a conversation with her. In that room, however, we had a Spanish New Testament that had been marked for evangelism. I could start at the beginning which was John 3:16 and at the bottom of the page, it would tell me which page to turn to next. It would go through verses like Ephesians 2:8-9, Romans 3:23, Romans 6:23, Romans 5:8, Romans 10:9-10, and so on. I handed her the Bible and turned to John 3:16 and that young mother stood there and read the text very slowly. Then she looked up at me and I say, "*¿comprede?*" She said, "sí." I turned the page to the next verse and she read that verse. When she finished, she looked up and I said, "*¿comprede?*" and she said, "sí." Here was this young lady reading God's Word and I could not say a word to her – I couldn't preach, I couldn't explain, I couldn't add an illustration – nothing. This kept going and when she got to the

Romans 10:9-10 passage where it says "*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart man believes under righteousness and with the mouth, confession is made unto salvation,*" her reaction was unlike anything I've seen before. When she finished reading this passage, she gasped, and tears didn't just fall from her eyes, they shot out of her eyes, straight toward the page and hit it so hard I could hear them! She looked up to me with her dark, tear-filled eyes and I said, "*¿comprede?*" and she tearfully responded, "sí." I turned to the back of that New Testament to a prayer that began, "*Señor Jesús...*" In her own language, she prayed the prayer and received Jesus as her Savior! I couldn't preach to her and I couldn't explain, but it was the naked, raw power of the Word of God that brought her to life! Brothers and sisters, God has not given us anything better than the Word of God to bring dead people to life!

There's one more thing we can't ignore. **God wants bones to live again so he calls us to spiritual life.** Look at verse 9-10, "*Then he said to me, '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.' 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.*" Skip down to verse 14 where we see the explanation of what all that means, "*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 like what Francis Chan said in his book, *Forgotten God*, "I am convinced there is a desperate need in the church for the Holy Spirit of God to be given room to have His way." We've always referred to this passage of Scripture as the valley of dry bones, but it occurred to me that this isn't a passage about dry bones at all. This is a passage about our God's amazing ability to raise the dead and He does it by His Word as it is anointed by His Spirit. When he had declared the Word of God to those dry bones and all the sinew, muscle, skin, and tissue came on, they stood up, but they were like a wax museum army. There was no life in them and so God said to "*prophesy to the breath.*" You know in Hebrew the word "ruach" means wind or breath or spirit; it's a play on words in the Hebrew Old Testament. This verse is saying the breath came into them and they were alive again. God's interpretation in verse 14 is simple because the vision never changed, "I will put my Spirit into defeated, dry, dead circumstances and situations and families and churches and denominations and people and I will make you live again."

You know, I thought I'd read it all – last week in *Facts & Trends* there was a very interesting story about the Amazon Echo, a little digital assistant that you can ask anything and it responds. The article talked about how one of the American denominations has developed an app that connects to the Amazon Echo so that "Alexa" (the name of the automated voice of the Echo) will pray for you. Let that sink in. Amazon's Echo, Alexa, a little computer disc that sits on your nightstand or kitchen table, will pray for you! I couldn't wait to see how this worked, so I ran to the Echo and said, "Alexa, pray for me!" She said, "My thoughts are with you." I tell you that to tell you this, you and I have a choice to make today – we can live in our own strength and have the same spiritual impact as the prayer life of a robot or we can invite the Holy Spirit of God to bring life into all of our dead places. You may say, "I appreciate what you're saying, but I wish this had been a New Testament message." What are you talking about?! Don't you remember that Jesus of Nazareth was beaten, bloodied, broken, and hung on a cross until He bled out and died? Then they put Him in a borrowed tomb and rolled a stone over the tomb. The Roman empire even put a seal on it as if to say "these bones won't live." But three days later – and we've been singing it ever since – "Up from the grave He arose with a mighty triumph o'er His foes! He arose a victor from the dark domain and He lives forever with His saints to

reign! He arose! He arose! Hallelujah, Christ arose!" The whole message of the whole Bible is God's ability to raise the dead even when it looks impossible to you and me. Don't be too sure about what God can't do.

A lot of strange things happen in a pastor's life; would you agree? I've been at Hyde Park for twenty-one years and about twenty years ago, I got a call to go visit an elderly member who was in ICU. I went to the hospital and saw she had a breathing tube taped around her mouth and she couldn't speak. Although she was on life-support, she was very much awake and alert. I went over to her and introduced myself as I was a relatively new pastor and figured she may not have known me. I told her I came to pray with her. There was also a nurse in the room and as I was concluding my prayer and talking with the nurse, who happened to also be a member of our church, the adult daughter of the elderly woman came busting (like a Texas tornado) into the room. She came over to her mother's bedside and said, "Momma, are you ready to go home? Are you ready to go be with daddy? Do you want to see Jesus, momma?" The elderly lady's eyes got real big and you didn't have to have a Ph.D. in neuroscience to see the panic and fear in that lady's eyes. She was motioning and trying to say, "No! No! No!" The lady's daughter said, "See, she's saying 'Home! Home! Home!'" The nurse and I were standing there in disbelief when the daughter said, "Okay, momma, we're going to let you go home." She turned towards the nurse and said, "We need to go ahead and do what we have to do" and she left! The nurse asked to see me outside the room. When we stepped out, she said, "Did you see anything strange in there?" I said, "Yeah! It looks like the daughter wants to pull the plug!" She said, "That's what I saw, too." Based on what we both saw, the nurse went to her supervisors and they took away the right of the family to discontinue life and pull the plug on that patient. Before you think I got involved in something that's none of my business, a month later that elderly lady, now healthy, made an appointment, came to my office, sat down across my desk, and said, "Thank you for coming to see me. Jesus helped me and ministered to me and I'm thankful I'm alive today." Here's the point of that story - the patient wanted to live, but the daughter wanted to pull the plug!

Brothers and sisters, you may be in a situation beyond this Convention, somewhere closer to home in which somebody in your life thinks it's time to just pull the plug on your ministry, your marriage, or the prodigal in the far country. Somebody may have already written you off or given up hope. There are a few inside and outside our Convention who are looking at all that we do here over these few days in Dallas and saying, publicly and privately, "It's about time that 'ole bunch pulls the plug." I've got some good news for you! No matter who says "pull the plug," the patient wants to live!

I've discovered in my walk with God that we never grow spiritually by accident. If you and I want something different in our lives, if we want an Ezekiel 37 moment over our marriages, over our churches, or over our ministries - we just can't wait for something to happen. We've got to be deliberate, intentional, and say "Lord God, I know it's all up to you, but if there's any part of this that I've got to respond and surrender to, I'm willing to do it." This is why I'm calling us to a moment of prayer and I don't mean silent prayer. This is a prayer where God's men and women need to get up on their feet and come down to the front to get on our faces before the Lord. I'm asking you to respond to this call to prayer. Some have said we shouldn't even have a Convention Sermon, but rather a Call to Prayer. Today, we are doing both! If God needs to breathe life over something dead in your heart, or in your ministry, or in your life - if you've felt like quitting and giving up and know God's not through with you - COME! Let's respond and ask God to breathe life on our churches, our families, our ministries, and our Convention.