

‘Hear Our Prayer’
Lent Course 2025 Session 3
Ezekiel – Hopeful Prayer

Welcome to session 3. This week we will be thinking about that mighty prophet Ezekiel. And Ezekiel teaches us how through prayer we can be prophets of the hope we find in the cross. Our past two sessions we have thought about how to pray. Today we are exploring what we do when we pray.

I wonder if you know that famous song by D:Ream called ‘Things can only get better’? Ideally I would now be playing it in the background but I’m too mean to pay for the copyright. Some joker managed to play it out at full blast by the gates of 10 Downing Street when poor Rishi Sunak, soaked by the rain, was trying to call a general election.

It gives quite a good account of a secular view of hope. The writer has found himself a new partner so now, obviously, things can only get better can’t they? The song understands hope as a wish that life may cheer up as measured against a set of undefined criteria.

People of faith have a much more robust view of hope. It’s as we pray hope breaks into the world, and as we pray that we hear our call to be prophets of hope. As in previous weeks I’m going to look first at Ezekiel and then at the praying life of Jesus to explore how that is so.

Ezekiel lived and prophesied at a time of appalling suffering and torment for the people of Judah and Jerusalem. In 597 BC the nation was overrun by the Babylonians, the Temple was destroyed, the city was laid waste and the ruling classes were carried into exile in Babylon. It was a time of desperate political and theological crisis. Could God really have abandoned his chosen people? Why had he broken his promises?

Ezekiel prophesied that destruction and many of his words in the earlier part of his book are filled with warnings about the punishment God would bring on his people because of their disobedience and unfaithfulness. But as the book develops, even from crisis, Ezekiel speaks words of hope. Powerful and beautiful hope.

Chapter 37 is perhaps the most extraordinary example of this. Ezekiel compares Judah to a valley filled with dry bones. It is an image of death and aridity and despair. No life or any possibility of life. But in his prayer, God calls Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones which, crazy as it may seem, he does. And the bones come together and grow flesh and sinews. Then he calls Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath, that it may come from the four winds. The bones breathe and stand and there is life. From the utter hopelessness of dried out bones, a new people is born, filled with life and with the spirit of God.

Ezekiel spoke from a context of sin and brokenness and disunity. But because he prayed, he had hope, a hope rooted not in the contingencies of human decision making, but in the sure and firm promises of the eternal God. For him, to hope was not a vague wish that things might cheer up a bit. It was trust in the God who can bring redemption and forgiveness and fresh life. Ezekiel teaches us that to pray is to hope. Because in prayer the redeeming power of the God who is doing something new comes breaking into this arid world.

We can see exactly that same thing in the praying life of Jesus. The agony of what Jesus endures on the cross is beyond description. A slow suffocation in which the only way to breath is to push on nails driven through your own flesh. Yet what does Jesus do on the cross? He prays.

And perhaps the most remarkable prayer is the one he offers for those who are crucifying him. Even as the nails are being driven through him he prays, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’ Father forgive them. Just think about that prayer.

On the cross Jesus deals with human sin. He dies the death we deserve because of the sin that has separated us from the Father, and by dying our death on our behalf, sin is defeated, death is destroyed and we are restored to right relationship with the God who made us and loves us. That salvation is our hope. As Christians our hope is rooted not in a wish that things might cheer up in the present, but in the certainty of what Jesus has already done in the past.

As he prays, 'Father forgive them,' Jesus asks that the power of the cross might flow down to release his captors from their sin. His praying unleashes the saving power of the cross and so brings the hope of salvation into the world. His prayer is the channels for hope.

Whenever we pray, we are united in prayer with the praying life of Jesus. And so our prayer has power to unleash into the world the hope we find in the cross of Jesus. Just think about that. Your prayer is a channel of God's redemption. Your prayer changes the universe. Your prayer is cosmic because it unleashes the saving hope we find in Jesus.

Ezekiel prayed over the dry bones and they had life. His praying unleashed God's redeeming power. When you pray, the dry bones of an arid world have life because of the hope we find in Jesus. We know that by his saving work Jesus has won the victory. In prayer we ask for the power of that future victory to come breaking into the present.

So imagine you are praying that someone might be healed. What are you actually doing? You are asking that God's future hope, in which bodies and minds are made whole, will come breaking into the present. Or imagine you are praying for peace in a war-torn nation. What are you doing? You are asking that God's future hope, in which humanity lives in harmony with God and each other, will come breaking into the present. Or imagine you are praying for a grief-stricken family, what are you doing? You are asking that the resurrection hope, which destroys death, might come breaking into the present and give them comfort. Your praying channels God's future hope into the now.

And this helps us to understand what some people call unanswered prayer. It can be a real challenge to faith when we pray with all our hearts for an outcome and God appears not to hear us. I remember many years ago being approached by a boy with cystic fibrosis. He was eleven years old, bright eyed and full of life, and he asked me, 'Why does God heal some people and not others?'

Of course I really struggled to find the right words. I wanted him to know that God answers every single prayer we ever offer, but that God's timing is different from ours. Because every prayer is answered in the resurrection. Sometimes when we pray God will strengthen our hope by answering that prayer with some more immediate gift or act of goodness. Those immediate answers to prayer are an anticipation of the resurrection life. But through the resurrection every prayer will one day be answered in a more glorious way than our earthbound minds can ever imagine possible. When God appears not to answer our prayers, it is because he is giving us more than we could ever ask for or imagine.

So far we have done a lot on the theory of prayer. When we pray, we unleash resurrection hope into the world. But what does all this mean in practical terms?

Let's get back to Ezekiel and the Valley of Dry Bones. God commanded Ezekiel, 'Prophecy to these bones...' Then later God commanded Ezekiel, 'Prophecy to the breath...' Through his prayer Ezekiel was able to prophesy. That meant he was the bridge between the present reality of the world and the future hope of God's plan.

When the Spirit came upon the church on the day of Pentecost, that spirit of prophecy became not the vocation of the few but the gift of the whole church. That means you are called to prophecy. As one who

believes in the resurrection, you know about the triumph of Jesus and the joy of the world that is to come. And you are called to speak that hope in today's world, so often a valley of death and despair. You are a prophet of hope.

But to be a prophet of hope Ezekiel had to pray or he would never have heard God's voice. And you cannot hope to fulfil your call as a prophet of hope unless your life is rooted in prayer. Because prayer equips you to be a prophet in two ways.

First, prayer strengthens your belief in the hope we find in what Jesus. You can't pray to a dead man. When you pray to the Lord Jesus, you are praying to someone alive and real. And that's because of the resurrection. It is as you pray that you come more and more to see that Jesus is alive, and that if he is alive all his promises are true. The more you pray the more you inevitably reach the conclusion that there is hope for humanity in the resurrection. And once you have that hope in your heart, you want to share it.

And second prayer gives you courage to live as a prophet of hope. We live in a culture where it is increasingly hard to live out the Christian life in public. Many Christians feel silenced in the workplace, they fear causing offence, they struggle to see how a revealed faith can fit in with such a fast-changing and complex culture. You need courage to stand up for Christ, and that courage comes from prayer. Another of our links as the Diocese of Blackburn is with the Anglican church in Multan in Pakistan, a place where Christians face oppression and persecution because of the notorious blasphemy laws. That Diocese has so much to teach us in the west about prayer, because it is through prayer that they continue to bear witness and the church grows. If you are nervous of sharing your faith, get praying. If you want to bear better witness to Christ, get praying.

Because Jesus says to you as he did to Ezekiel, 'Prophesy over this damaged and sinful world.' It is through prayer that you can fulfil that calling. As you work for reconciliation and try to bring people together, you are a prophet, pointing to the unity of all people united by the Easter triumph of Christ. As you model honesty and integrity in the workplace, you are a prophet, bearing witness to the Risen Christ and his plan for his people. As you take a stand against injustice and give a voice to the poor, you are a prophet, standing up for the preciousness and beauty of every single human person for whom Christ died. As you share your faith with others, you are a prophet, inviting people into life-giving relationship with the God who has died to save them. In all these ways you are being a prophet. And it is your praying that makes that possible.

In our first session we considered how we could grow in our personal prayer lives. In the second session we talked about greater ambition in prayer. Next week we will think how we can pray communally. In our last session we will set for ourselves a rhythm of prayer. Combined together those four components can develop your life of prayer. And that will both strengthen your hope and equip you to live it out as a prophet of hope.

Because think what power is yours. Whenever you pray, you live the resurrection. Whenever you pray, resurrection life flows out from you and changes the world. God's future triumph breaks into the present. Through prayer, you are a prophet of hope.