

# REDEFINING NORMAL

**Life Group Materials**

Adapted from the book  
Redefining Normal by  
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# Redefining Normal Hope

## Ezekiel 37:1-14

Illustration: Cube

Ask everyone to take a piece of paper and draw a cube on it. Draw the cube by drawing two squares and then connecting the corners. Tell the students to stare at the center of the cube. After about 30 seconds, ask the students which face of the cube is in front, the top one or the bottom one?

Connecting the illustration: Staring at this cube teaches us the power of perspective. After just a few seconds, you can't tell which face of the cube is in front and which is in back. You can have one opinion, and someone else can have the opposite opinion, and you both can be right. It's all about perspective. People have very different perspectives not just when they look at a cube but when they look at the world. And today, we're going to talk about one characteristic that more than any other causes those of us who follow God to see the world differently. Today, we're going to redefine normal when it comes to hope.

### BACKGROUND

Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14

Ezekiel was a prophet of the exile. The exile came when the Assyrians conquered the two tribes in the nation of Israel and the Babylonians captured the 10 tribes in the nation of Judah. During this time, the Israelites' homes were destroyed, the temple was ransacked, and the conquerors took the best of each nation, including children, back to Assyria or Babylon. Ezekiel lived and prophesied before and during this time. His prophecy both predicted this devastation and declared hope in the midst of it.

Chapters 1-24 of Ezekiel take place before the fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel's message during this period was predominately that judgment was coming. In graphic physical pictures, Ezekiel demonstrated the sin of the nation and God's response. Chapter 10 is the climax, as in a vision Ezekiel saw the glory of God depart from the temple. In other words, God had left the building, and the nation was ripe to be conquered.

Chapters 25-32 declare judgment on other nations that had assisted in the exile of God's people or mocked them during this time of crisis. Chapters 33-48 of the book declare hope for a captured people, hope that God will return to His people, deliver them from their oppressors, reinstate them in their land, and once again be their God. Today we pick up on this message of hope.

Discussion Questions

1. **What is the picture in this passage of Scripture?**
2. **What does God ask Ezekiel to do in the midst of the bones? Does this seem ridiculous to you? How would you have reacted if you were Ezekiel?**
3. **How is the image in Ezekiel 37 an image of hope? How can we see ourselves in this passage?**

- 4. Do you think that we as Christians have lost the value of hope as a central part of our message? If so, why? If not, how has emphasizing hope played a major role in church as you know it?**

## **EXPLANATION**

The vision of Ezekiel in this passage is, to say the least, a little bit eerie. God took Ezekiel to a valley full of dry bones from bodies that had been dead for quite a while and basically asked him the same question that we have been asking all day: What do you see? It's a question that is bigger than we might anticipate at first, because seeing is not always confined to the eyes. It's a question that strikes not just at the reality of what is but also the possibility of what could be. So, let's look a little bit closer at this story and see if it challenges the way we see things.

Ezekiel awakes in his vision surrounded by bones. But these were not just any bones. These were the bones of the exiles, bones of friends, acquaintances, and countrymen. These were bones that testified to the totality of destruction and desolation that had been leveled against Ezekiel's people. Even more, these bones testified to the seeming finality that this destruction and devastation had brought. What could be more final than death?

As Ezekiel surveyed the area, he was asked: "Can these bones live?" (v. 3) To our natural minds, the answer is obviously no. But with the Spirit at his side and the ultimate reality of God looming in the background, Ezekiel turned back the question: "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know." (v. 4) In other words, Ezekiel looked at God and said "I don't know. I know what I can see with my eyes, but God, I need you to help me see what the eyes can't." Ezekiel didn't dare devalue the devastation and pain the bones revealed, but he didn't want to limit God either.

God then told Ezekiel to speak to the bones, a command that must have seemed ridiculous to him. What could words do for bones? But where Ezekiel saw finality, God saw possibility. Death would not have the last word on the life of the bones – God would. Where Ezekiel saw hopelessness, God saw the greatest opportunity for hope. Nothing can contain God. And once Ezekiel began to speak, the bones began to rattle, then to connect, and finally to form an army. It was as if Ezekiel pushed the rewind button. The bones were coming back to life.

This picture in Ezekiel 37 graphically demonstrates what the awakened life of a follower of God can look like. Christians are those who are living among the dead. Driven by the hand of God and charged to speak the words of life, we too are forced to face the question, "Can these bones live?"

Sadly, this image seems to be far removed from our thinking about our call as Christians. Yes, we have hope. But often, our hope is reserved for some day in the future when Christ will come back and set everything straight. Normal hope for the Christian is too many times a future-tense kind of seeing. But redefining normal challenges this view. It challenges us to see hope not only in the future but also in the present. It challenges us to see and speak and expect that change might happen today.

## **The Main Point**

### Discussion Questions

- 1. Do you think the world sees Christians as people of hope? Why/why not?**
- 2. What role has hope played in your life?**
- 3. How does living by hope change your perspective of the world?**
- 4. What kind of actions does living in hope push you toward?**

## APPLICATION

Living among the dead is indeed a challenge. Speaking words of life to dead bones requires faith and hope. It seems absurd to venture into life with this perspective. It's safer just to thank God for saving us and move on. But faith pushes us – moves us, as we saw in our last session – toward the kinds of things that some would call absurd. It moves us toward the kind of risk that causes God's kingdom to take root in the world. If faith pushes us toward this absurd reality, it is hope that will keep us there. Hope is the result of faith. In faith we move. In hope, we expect that while we are moving God is also moving with us, moving to change the world with us.

That is why living in hope leads us to see God, the world and ourselves differently. **Hope sees.** Hope tells us that God's grace is big enough for anyone. If dead bones can be turned into an army, then even the least or the worst of us is not outside of God's reach. We must remember this truth both for ourselves and for those whom we encounter. No situation we face is outside of God's redeeming power. No person we meet is so far dead that he cannot be revived. Change is possible.

If no one is outside God's grasp, then the Christian must see everything she encounters as an opportunity for God to work. Nothing is too big for God. Where the world sees devastation, the Christian sees restoration. We do this because we see through hope. While we don't devalue the pain of those around us, we rest assured that God will have the last word as we venture out in faith. And in our world, where depression, divorce and anxiety are the norm, the message of hope is of vital importance.

For far too long, hope has been left on the sidelines of the Christian message. Christians have been far too content to deliver the message of judgment, self-righteousness, or sin management, but we have forgotten that the basic message of our faith is that *Christ is risen*. He has defeated the menacing foe of death and breathed life into a dying world. As bearers of this hope, we see life through a different lens.

Living in hope also challenges us to embrace the responsibility of redemption. Living heaven's agenda out on earth demonstrates the power of hope to the world. We must be agents of redemption, bringing good into bad, light into darkness, and deliverance to the helpless. Do you remember Jesus' mission statement that we talked about in Session One? (Luke 4:14-21) We too are to bring healing to the lame and blind and deliverance for the captives and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. We are to see hope and bring it.

## Turning Point

Read this quote from Saint Augustine and then discuss it: "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage is to see that they do not remain the way they are."

### Discussion Questions

1. **What does this quote say about hope?**
2. **How does anger lead to hope? How does courage help us live out hope?**
3. **How would you put this quote in your own words?**
4. **How can hope affect your world today?**
5. **How can you be a lens of hope to others by acting like Jesus?**
6. **What change in the world is hope inspiring your life to be part of?**

The final image that we want to leave with today is the image of the pillow and the preserver. The pillow demonstrates the life of comfort. The preserver demonstrates the life of risk. Like a lifeguard, whose job compels him to risk comfort for the sake of the lives of others, we as Christians are called to be a force of life among the

perishing. We must not be content to stay comfortable with our lives. We must venture toward risk, confidently expecting God to meet us in the water.