

The Skeleton – Prophecy to the Bones

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Valley of Dried Bones" by Abraham Rattner

Prayer of Illumination

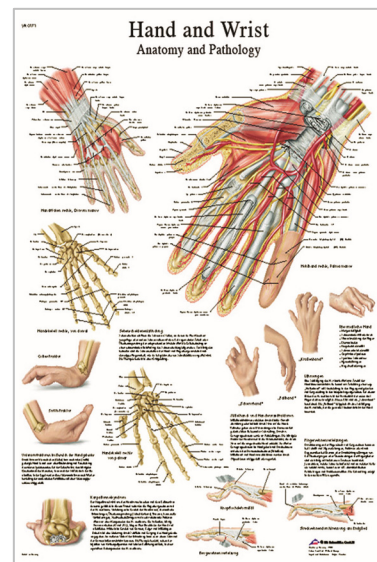
Almighty God, by your Holy Spirit, illumine the sacred page, we pray, that our minds may be open to receive your Word, our hearts taught to love it, and our wills strengthened to obey it, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Background

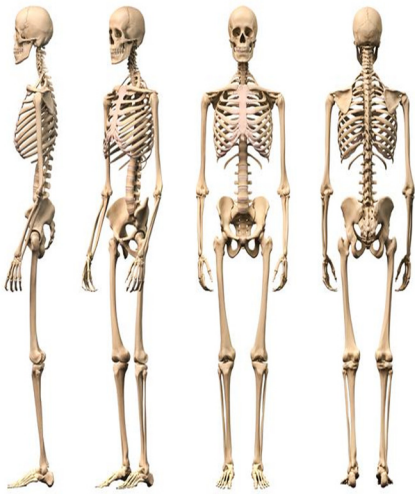
Take a look at your hand. It's pretty amazing.
You're looking at:

29 bones,
17 muscles,
2 main arteries,
3 major nerves,
40+ regular nerves,
and 123 ligaments.

Some say it's the hand not the eye that's the most magnificent part of the human body. The psalmist got it right, we're fearfully and wonderfully made.



All bodies are a balancing act between stability and mobility. The larger the animal, the bigger the bones. Elephants are 13% bone. The small mole-like shrew is 4% skeleton. We human beings are 8.5% bone.



We ask a lot of these bodies of ours—our skeletons need to be both rigid and flexible. We need to stand firm and also twist and turn. It's not as easy as it sounds.

Bone is stronger than reinforced concrete, yet light enough for us to sprint. Your bones weigh no more than 20 lbs, but they can withstand up to a ton of compression.

We generally have 206 bones, but one person in every eight has an extra pair of ribs while those with Down's Syndrome have one less pair. The hands and feet alone take up more than half of our bones. We don't count the small sesamoid bones in the 206 count even though the kneecap or patella is also a sesamoid bone. Bones do a lot—much more than providing scaffolding for us. They protect our insides,

manufacture blood cells, store chemicals, transmit sound (our middle ear), and as recent research within the last two decades has shown, bones bolster our memory and buoy our spirits.

Exercise is good for our bones, not only strengthening them but decreasing our chances of Alzheimer's. Bones don't scar when they heal like our skin does. Bones can even partially grow back. Bones in literature often represent life. We feel something deep inside our bones. Our bones truly are living tissue.

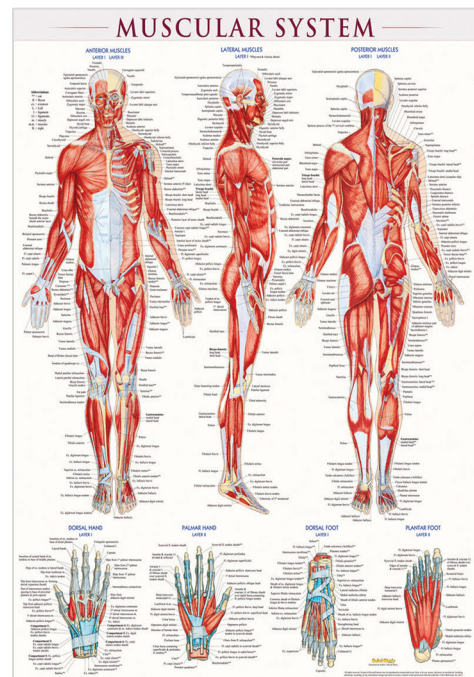
Bones need to be connected, so tendons connect muscles to bone and ligaments connect bone to bone.

We also can't forget cartilage—it's truly amazing. There's nothing quite like it on earth, both smooth and strong. Imagine a hockey rink made not of ice but cartilage. Hockey players could skate 16 times faster on cartilage.

You have more than 600 muscles in your body. You're roughly 40% muscle if you're reasonably slender; a little less if female and of the same build.

Each time in worship we ask you stand, you're using 100 of your 600 muscles.

From late middle-age onward, our bones lose mass at a rate of about 1% every year. In the United States, 800,000 joint replacement surgeries are done every year, mainly on hips and knees.



Our poor hips are asked to do so much. That's why they wear out. Hips are particularly tough for the elderly. One orthopedic surgeon was fond of the quip: "We enter the world through the pelvis and leave it through the hip." Which leads us to our Scripture reading this Pentecost Sunday. It's a vision that represents the people of God transformed from dry, scattered bones to a vast multitude, set free to serve the living God.

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14 (NRSV)

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on 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 had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and 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, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON: The Skeleton – Prophecy to the Bones

I got a messenger call from Evan a couple of days ago. He was in the youth group I led in Georgia before coming to Tucson. The last time I talked to him, he was seventeen years old. He's in his early thirties now. Evan has a heart of gold and embraces who he is. He's a card-carrying, self-proclaimed nerd. He loves photography, writing poetry, listening to music, and connecting with others.

I think it has always been tough for Evan to find his place in the world, but the last decade or so has been an extended exile for him. Battled depression. Got bullied at work by multiple co-workers. Tried to make friends and connections with others, but it just wasn't happening, no matter how hard he tried. He got stressed and felt alienated, emotionally, relationally, and vocationally exiled. He turned to food to comfort him, and he put on a lot of weight.

He wanted to tell me the new thing God was doing in his life. A change happened, light broke through his darkness. Evan found not just new a job, but a calling. His gift of photography and sales intersected with his small town's needs. The community has embraced him and he them. Evan also stepped out in faith and went to a Presbyterian picnic. He found a place there too—acceptance and a people to worship and fellowship with. It's been two years and he wanted to let me know.

Can these dry bones come to life again? Evan's answer is a resounding **YES!** God called him out of his grave, his exile was transformed into an exodus. Evan is walking in God's freedom, purpose, and joy. Evan believes not only in life *after* death, but in life *before* death.



In our Scripture, the prophet Ezekiel is seized by the hand of God and moved by the Spirit to a vision of a boneyard in a valley. Scattered bones were bleached white and dried out by the desert sun. It's a haunted place of catastrophe—likely a battlefield defeat. The bodies were not given proper burial. It's a place of utter hopelessness. Yet God already promised the prophet Ezekiel in the chapter before: the ruined cities will be crowded with people once more.

But their present was a different story from their future. The vision God gave to the prophet Ezekiel was a picture of the shattered remains of a people in exile for more than ten years. God gave Ezekiel and the people of Israel a guided tour of their problems. There was no sugar coating going on here—no bones about it. Faith first requires honesty, a recognition of reality. Honesty: this is a hopeless situation. There are no signs of life.

What valley of dry bones has God been showing you?

Could it be the ravages of 587,000+ deaths in the US and 3.4 million in the world from Covid? Could it be the challenges before us of re-entry and re-starting Church in a pandemic? A dashed dream, a broken relationship, or a life-chapter ending on a sour note?

Mortal, can these bones live?

I like Ezekiel's response to God's question. He didn't give the Sunday School answer of "Yes, of course God!" In other words he avoided the arrogance and presumption of a glib answer. Ezekiel also didn't say, "No, of course not God, you know and I know they're dead." The prophet didn't succumb to unbelief and cynicism either. Ezekiel knew God is our creator, the Author of Life, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living. So Ezekiel humbly responded, "You alone know God." Hear the good news Immanuel: God is the God of the impossible. Our God is in the restoration business. Jesus in the resurrection business. God's Spirit has the life-giving power to turn a valley of dry bones into a restored and revived people.

It's all God, yet he invites not just our observation of this miracle, but our participation, to have some skin in the game. Engage and join in God's re-creation. Along with Ezekiel, God summons us to step out in faith and join him in the impossible, to even look a little silly. Preach to the dry bones. Pray to the wind. Prophecy to the people. And with Ezekiel, we obey God's command. We have the audacity to believe God's Spirit can breathe new life into the dispirited. Notice that God's miracle came in two stages. In the first phase there was a rattling and shaking of bones getting reconnected, bone to bone. Then came sinews, ligaments, tendons, cartilage, and flesh returned.

Decomposition is reversed—this is re-composition. Regeneration. Yet there was no breath in these new bodies. They remained on the floor of the valley. You can have:

- the skeleton to provide structure,
- tendons and ligaments to provide unity and togetherness,
- muscles that provide strength and resources, and
- skin for protection and appearance,

... but if you don't have the life-giving breath of God's Spirit, you're just a hunk of flesh, a bag of bones. But Ezekiel obeyed again and this time prophesied to the wind, and God's breath resuscitated the flesh and bones. Their eyes opened. They stood on their feet using their new 100 muscles—a vast multitude, but with God's *ruach*, which in Hebrew means spirit, breath, and wind. With the Spirit, God's animating power brings motion. The improbable and impossible happens in the most unpromising of places. Miracles happen where there is not health, but brokenness.

There's so much to be gleaned from this passage:

- First, God intervenes. The hand of the Lord took hold of Ezekiel. God grabs hold of us as well and takes us to new places.
- Second, God speaks. God not only listens to our prayers, but God speaks to us. We just need to listen. God not only speaks, but God acts.
- Third, God invites our speaking. God invites us to speak, to believe, to trust, to obey, to witness, and to prophecy to the people for the impossible. Preach to the dead bones. Pray to the wind. Prophecy to the people.

It's an act of courage to believe God can reverse the curse. To really believe the status quo isn't the final say. The snow is melting and spring is returning to Narnia, that the last ring is rid from Middle Earth. God can re-enchant our disenchantment. The kingdom of God is at hand.

Pentecost reminds us how much we need the Spirit. The Hebrew word *ruach* is used 10x in this passage. This divine “air motion” breathes new life in us, gets us on our feet again, revives our deflated dispositions and emotions. This is what God has been doing since the very beginning.

- In **Genesis 1**, the spirit of God hovered over the waters and God spoke, bringing light to darkness, order to chaos.
- In **Genesis 2**, God shaped man from the dust of the ground and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, making him a living being.
- **Jesus in the Gospel according to John** breathes upon the fearful disciples after the resurrection, giving them the Spirit, filling them with hope and courage to witness and to carry on his work.
- And in **Acts 2 on Pentecost**, the mighty rushing wind of the Spirit coming upon the gathered and praying church, with tongues of fire alighting upon them, speaking God’s praises in many languages.

God is doing the same today with his chosen people, where we’re enlivened and energized by the Spirit to keep praying, prophesying, preaching, and healing in situations of despair. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit dwells in us, giving us an **incarnational faith** that relates with others and an **inspirational faith** that is God-breathed. Something greater than us is at work here. As Isaiah tells us, the spirit of God comes upon us, for a purpose, for a mission, giving us wisdom and insight, counsel and power, knowledge and the awe of God. Not just facts about God, but knowledge of God. A relationship.

Peter tells us in his Pentecost preaching, that the Spirit rests upon us by God’s grace to prophesy and to see visions and dream dreams. This is not just for prophets, but for all God’s people, sons and daughters, young and old, men and women, rich and poor. The Spirit instills hope and a future and a purpose in our lives, individually as believers and collectively as a people. We have new potential, new possibility with the Spirit in us that we never had before. God puts us back on our feet again, gives us a second wind when the wind has been knocked out of us and we’re short of breath. We’re enlivened to enjoy life, energized to obey and serve. We’re given a new work to do. As the Psalmist says, “You’ve delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I walk before the Lord in the land of the living.”

We can tear up those old scripts and narratives we rehearse and repeat to ourselves over and over:

Our bones are dried up.
Our hope is dead.
We’re doomed, nothing will change.
We’re finished.

For each defeated response we have, God responds with an affirmation: I will get you out, I will lift you up, and I will bring you back. Then God says to us, Look. See what I am doing. Take a closer look. Believe my miracles. Your exile is over. A new exodus has begun. I will roll away the stone from your tomb. I will lift you up from your grave. I will bring you back home.

The term, “saved by the bell” is an interesting one. In bygone generations, a bell was sometimes included in a coffin. If you happened to be prematurely thought for dead, you could ring that bell to let people know you were alive, and they would furiously dig to get you out. But with God, *he’s the one* that rings the bell. Waking us from our slumber, and bringing us back into the land of the living. God’s word spoken over us speaks life into our dead situations, speaks life to our dead relationships. You are delivered and set free. Be birthed again out of your tomb. Don’t stay there. Cry out like a child of God and breathe deep the breath of God!

Live into the abundant and eternal life God offers, even now. You can know, really know the living God. We are his people and you are a new creation. God has spoken and he will make good on his word, once again.

Amen.

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