



*Community is shaped by the conversations we share. These questions are just a tool to help you meaningfully engage with the themes of this week's teaching.*

## Discussion Questions

**Scriptures:** Ezekiel 37:1-2, 3-4, 7-12.

**Summary:** This week, we're talking about joy at the bottom and Ezekiel 37:1-12. Using historical memory and metaphor, Ezekiel takes us to the worst moments of our lives to tell us about hope and what it is that brings life to our bodies and souls.

**Exile and Apocalypse.** To situate us in the story, Jeremy provided a quick snapshot of Hebrew history: the nation splits into two kingdoms, Assyria conquers the northern kingdom of Israel, and about a century later, Babylon conquers the southern kingdom called Judah, and then Babylon conquers Assyria too. This happened in the early sixth century BCE, a demoralizing period in Jewish history that was fertile for Jewish writing. This is when most of the Hebrew Bible, the Tanakh, is put together. Ezekiel is writing in the aftermath of the exile and the destruction of Jerusalem – the lowest point in the Jewish story. Ezekiel is at the foundation of the apocalyptic genre (a genre that uses wild imagery to uncover something hidden). Ezekiel wants our hope for the future to overrule the testimony of the present. And that's what joy sometimes requires of us as well.

**Big Bad Valleys.** Eze 37:1. In keeping with the apocalyptic genre, the valley here is a metaphor meant to invoke two significant valleys in the Hebrew story: Hinnom (where Ammonites were believed to have offered child sacrifices to Molek) and Meggido (where lots of violent battles were fought). Both were meant to indicate "a hell on earth" and were part of the collective historical memory. Ezekiel saw his nation crumble and his friends go into exile, so he takes us to the valley to tell us that the story of returning to life starts in hell, to ground us in the worst moments of our lives as a starting point for joy.

**The Worst Moment of Your Life.** Eze 37:1-2. Ezekiel takes us to that place because sometimes we need to intentionally go into places where there's no hope left if we are to survive them. During weddings, Jeremy often quotes the song "One" by U2 because of its lyrics, which talk about how people will hurt and disappoint each other. At some point in his life, Jeremy read a letter that

his wife wrote in the first few years of their marriage, and that felt like there was no coming back from that; the relationship felt like very dry bones Ezekiel was talking about. We should not gloss over that imagery as a starting point for joy because part of joy is having hope that the present doesn't determine the future.

**Reviving Body and Soul.** Eze 37:3-4, 7-12. Ezekiel is telling us that what we thought was the end, wasn't. But Ezekiel also helps us uncover joy in the two-step return: body and breath. We should be careful not to slip into the dualism of Greek thought - spirits trapped in bodies. Hebrew imagination did not have that dualism. But it is a reminder that if we do not care for our bodies, it will be harder for God to breathe life into our souls. However, as human beings, we do not only need good nutrition and taking care of our bodies, which alone will not animate us; we need the spirit that animates us and gives us a story and a sense of purpose that moves us forward, makes joy possible even in the valley.

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**Connect.** Last week, we talked about finding joy in ordinary, everyday moments of life.

What were some of those moments for you last week?

Where did you find joy? And what helped you notice those moments (sometimes we tend to miss them)?

**Share.** In the exile and apocalypse part of the message, Jeremy talked about how Israel's historical tragedy in the 6th century BCE turned into a productive and creative season of putting together the Hebrew Bible. Ezekiel's imagery and writing in exile led to the rediscovery of hope and joy. Share about a time in your life when a difficult situation led to unexpected growth or joy. What stayed with you from that season in life? How is that an encouragement for you today?

**Reflect.** What resonates with you in Ezekiel's imagery in our text for today—dry bones, "hell on earth" places, desolation, the presence of God, etc? What do you see in this story that invokes emotion or connects with you?

What do you think about Ezekiel's starting point for joy - "the worst moment of your life"? Reflect on the place of dry bones in the valleys in your journey. (Feel free to listen to "One" by U2:)

*"Sometimes we need to intentionally go to the places we avoid if we're actually going to survive them."*

How true has this been in your life?

**Engage.** What do you think about the two-step return to life that Ezekiel describes - body and breath?

*Jeremy said, "To be human, to be fully alive is to be both — embodied and enlivened. And what I mean by that is if you find yourself in that low place, you're not gonna find your way out just by thinking better thoughts. Bones and tendons and muscles and skin, THIS [body] is as much part of you as what happens up HERE [in your head]."*

How does this thought resonate with you?

From your personal experience, what connection have you observed between your physical well-being and your spiritual health? How do you balance both, and how do they shape your experience of joy?

What do you think about this idea that to become truly alive, according to Ezekiel, we need a story?

Engage with the quote from the sermon below and share how this has been true for you:

*"But what I take from Ezekiel here is that we all need more than calories. We need a story.*

*Because hope is a trajectory to point toward.*

*And life is a narrative to drive us.*

*Joy is a sense that there is purpose behind the beating of your heart.*

*And that purpose doesn't need to be big.*

*It doesn't need to be earthshaking or world-changing.*

*It can be as simple as being a better friend today than you were yesterday, or kinder than you were last week, more caring than what has been offered to you. But when that purpose feels like it has been breathed into you by*

*something beyond you, and it actually begins to animate your physical presence here on the Earth, then I honestly believe there is a joy that can heal dry bones and breathe new life. A joy that can make possible real celebration, even in the valley."*

**Take away.** Take a moment to think about what makes joy resilient to life's challenges. What helps you have hope even in despair? Feel free to share one thought about the resiliency of your joy or one way you cultivate (or aspire to cultivate) that kind of resilient joy.

**Prayer from the sermon:**

*God of the joyful ordinary,  
God of the hopeful future,  
Might you help us to savour small moments well,  
And to realize your presence  
Apart from the experience of the religious,  
Away from the experience of the ecstatic,  
And very much in the easy-to-miss moments that make us smile.  
May we start to find contentment  
In the everyday content of our lives:  
Friendship  
And sunshine  
And good news  
And long conversations.  
Might we learn to dream big  
But always to root those dreams in being content with what we already have,  
And might that story lead us to be more courageous,  
More generous,  
More kind,  
More committed to the path of peace and the way of grace,  
In the strong name of the risen Christ, we pray. Amen*