

What Do You See?

An Invitation to the Valley

Chapter 2

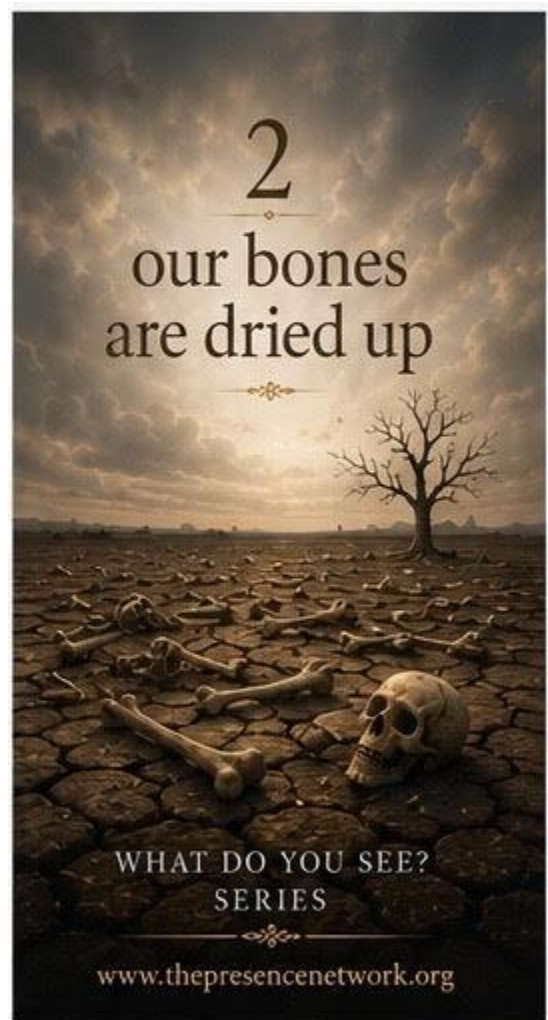
Our Bones Are Dried Up

There is something powerful about being heard. Not corrected. Not fixed. Not analyzed. Simply heard. One of the most remarkable moments in Ezekiel 37 is that God tells Ezekiel exactly what the people are saying. *“These bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’”* (Ezekiel 37:11) Before God speaks restoration, He acknowledges their reality. Before The Eternal One speaks life, He reveals that He has heard their despair. Before The Presence offers hope, The Presence names their pain, this matters because many people carry the secret fear that God sees their behavior but not their suffering, that He notices their failures but not their wounds, that He sees their weakness but not their exhaustion. Ezekiel reveals something profoundly different. The Eternal One hears the conversation happening beneath the surface, the words people speak in the darkness, the sentences they repeat to themselves when nobody else is listening. He hears the stories they have come to believe, and what He hears is heartbreaking, *“Our bones are dried up.”*

When Pain Becomes Identity

Notice what the people do not say, they do not say: *“We are struggling,”* or: *“We are grieving,”* or: *“We have experienced loss,”* instead, they describe themselves through the lens of their condition. The dryness has become personal, their wound has become their identity, this is one of the greatest dangers of prolonged suffering. A painful experience becomes a *painful story*; a painful story becomes a *painful belief*. A painful belief becomes a *painful identity*, and eventually we stop saying: *“I experienced rejection,”* instead we begin saying: *“I am unwanted.”* We stop saying: *“My marriage failed,”* and begin saying: *“I am a failure.”* We stop saying: *“I struggle with addiction,”* and begin saying: *“I am broken.”* We stop saying: *“I am grieving,”* and begin saying: *“I will never be whole again.”*

Pain begins as an event, but if left unexamined, it slowly becomes a lens through which everything is interpreted. Israel was no longer simply experiencing exile; they had become exiles in their own minds. The walls of Babylon surrounded them physically; the despair of Babylon surrounded them internally, many of us know exactly what that feels like.



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The Erosion of Hope

Hope rarely disappears overnight, most often it erodes, like water wearing away stone: little by little, disappointment by disappointment, loss by loss, prayer by prayer that seems unanswered, relationship by relationship that doesn't turn out as expected. The result? Hope weakens gradually, until one day we hear ourselves saying things we never thought we would say: *"Nothing ever changes", "What's the point?", "I've tried everything", "People don't really change", "This is just who I am", "It's too late."* These statements sound reasonable, sometimes they even sound wise, but often they are not wisdom, they are exhaustion speaking, they are grief speaking, they are fear speaking, they are the voice of dry bones.

The Eeyore Syndrome

I often think of Eeyore from Winnie-the-Pooh. If you ask Eeyore how he's doing, the answer is almost always predictable. *"Oh, Not so good," (in that deep familiarly hopeless tone)*. Even when something positive happens, Eeyore anticipates disappointment. Even when help arrives, he expects it to fail. Even when friends care for him, he remains convinced that things will not improve. Most of us smile when we think about Eeyore, but many of us have lived as Eeyore, not because we are weak, because we have been hurt.

When life wounds us deeply enough, pessimism can feel safer than hope. If I expect nothing, I cannot be disappointed. If I hope for nothing, I cannot lose anything. If I believe nothing will change, I will never have to grieve unmet expectations. While pessimism may protect us from disappointment, it also protects us from possibility. Pessimism builds walls around the heart, and eventually those walls keep out both pain and healing.

The Hidden Exhaustion

Some dryness is obvious: People see it; friends notice; family members become concerned, but another kind of dryness is much harder to recognize, the dryness hidden beneath functioning. People continue going to work, continue attending church, continue raising children, continue caring for spouses, continue showing up, yet internally they feel empty. Their smiles are present, their joy is absent, their bodies are moving, their spirits are weary. Many caregivers know this experience, many healthcare workers know it, many pastors know it, many parents know it, many spouses know it, many grieving people know it. From the outside everything appears normal, inside, the bones feel dry. Perhaps that is why this chapter matters so much: *God is not intimidated by the places we hide*. The Eternal One is not discouraged by the dryness we cannot explain. He is not repelled by our exhaustion. In fact, He walks directly into the valley.

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God Does Not Argue

One of the most beautiful aspects of this story is what God does not do. Notice: He does not argue with the people; He does not say: *"Your bones aren't really dry."* He does not say: *"You should be more positive."* He does not say: *"If you had more faith, you wouldn't feel this way."* He does not shame them for their despair. He simply acknowledges it. That is often where healing begins: not with denial, not with pretending, not with forced optimism, but with honesty. The truth may hurt, but it is also the doorway through which restoration enters. You cannot heal a wound you refuse to acknowledge. You cannot restore what you pretend is healthy. You cannot receive breath while insisting you do not need it. Israel's honesty became the first step toward restoration. Perhaps ours can as well.

Reflection Questions

1. Have you ever allowed a painful experience to become part of your identity?
2. What labels do you place upon yourself that may be rooted more in pain than truth?
3. In what area of life has hope begun to erode?
4. What statements do you find yourself repeating when you feel discouraged?
5. Are there places where you appear strong externally while feeling exhausted internally?

Journal Exercise

Complete the following statements:

- The wound that has most shaped my life is _____.
- The story I tell myself about that wound is _____.
- What I fear is permanently lost is _____.
- The label I most often place on myself is _____.
- If God were speaking to me in this valley, He might remind me _____.

Presence Practice

Find a quiet place and sit comfortably, place one hand over your heart and take several slow breaths. Without judgment, ask yourself: *"What pain have I allowed to define me?" "What story about myself do I repeat most often?" "What part of me feels dried up?"*

Write your answers, do not edit them, do not defend them, simply notice them. Awareness is often the first movement of healing.

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Closing Meditation

The people said: *“Our bones are dried up.”* God did not disagree. The people said: *“Our hope is gone.”* God did not argue. The people said: *“We are cut off.”* God did not shame them, instead, He entered the valley, He listened, He acknowledged their pain, and then He began showing them that their condition was not their identity. Dryness was real. despair was real, exile was real, but none of those things were the final word. The valley was where they were, it was not who they were, and perhaps the same is true for you.

The next question remains: *If your pain is not your identity... **Then who are you?***