



# Places of Compassion and People of Hope

A Bible study for the film *Ragman* (based on the story by Walter Wangerin, Jr.)

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## Introduction

“It’s hopeless,” he said as he ordered people to evacuate their homes. The wildfire was raging out of control. Record heat, low humidity, and strong winds made containing the blaze impossible and evacuation necessary.

“You’re hopeless,” her daughter said, as she slammed the car door and went into school, leaving her mother in silence. She had forgotten about her daughter’s school play and scheduled a meeting with a client. Driving to work, she wondered how she had missed every dramatic performance when she had always wanted to be involved in her daughter’s life.

From the chaos of a disaster zone to the quiet of a car, hopelessness can appear in many places.

- If you were filming the resurrection and needed a scene of hopelessness, what place would you choose? Why?
- How would you depict this place in the film?
- Why would you depict it that way?

## Exploring the Scriptures

In our Scripture reading, God takes Ezekiel to a place of hopelessness, a valley of dry bones.

*Read Ezekiel 37:1-2.*

- What details of the scene does the text highlight?
- Why are those details important?

The text highlights that the bones were very many (v. 2a) and were scattered across the valley. Only a massive destruction could have produced so many dead people and a tearing apart of the bodies would have scattered their bones. These bones were also very dry (v. 2b), meaning that they had been exposed for some time.

Culturally, unburied bones would signal the extent of the destruction (no one was left to care for the dead)

or the nature of the dead (no one loved them enough to give them the honor of burial). This was a place of great destruction and dishonor. It was a place without hope.

- How would Ezekiel have felt about this experience?

This vision would have challenged Ezekiel’s understanding of spiritual service. Ezekiel was a priest, desiring to serve the Lord, but he was never able to serve in the temple in Jerusalem. A priest needed to be 30 years old for such service and, when Ezekiel was 26, Nebuchadnezzar fought Jerusalem, taking the king, 10,000 people, and Ezekiel into exile in Babylon.

Although Ezekiel never served in a temple, he knew the laws of purity and sought to keep himself pure (see 4:9-15). Now, however, God immersed Ezekiel in a place of ritual uncleanness, placing him in the valley (v. 1) and leading him among the many dry bones (v. 2).

*Read Ezekiel 37:3-10.*

God doesn’t only immerse Ezekiel in uncleanness and destruction. God immerses Ezekiel in the divine work of resurrection. God, who created the world by speaking (Gen 1), could have simply spoken and brought the bones to life. But God involves Ezekiel in his work.

- How does God involve Ezekiel in the divine work of resurrection?

God begins by calling upon Ezekiel to a hope that rests in the Lord (v. 3). When God asks Ezekiel if these bones can live, Ezekiel does not answer “yes” (in false confidence) or “no” (in human despair). Instead, he turns to God and lives in the hope that rests in God alone.

God then encourages Ezekiel to engage in public witness and prayer. Ezekiel is called to prophecy to the bones (v. 4). Normally, one would prophesy to the living, who could hear and respond. God called Ezekiel to trust in the power of the divine word, even when it was spoken to dry bones.

After Ezekiel prophesied to the bones, God called him to pray for the Spirit to bring life to the bones (v. 9). Ezekiel is a priest who now performs his holy service as a person of hope in the most hopeless of places.

He stands as an intermediary, between God and the people, proclaiming and praying and trusting in the power of God’s word.

## Exploring the Film

Watch the film (either in its entirety or in two portions) and consider the following questions related to the two major sections of the film.

### Places of Compassion:

The first part follows the Ragman through places of hopelessness as he turns them into places of compassion.

- Choose a place of hopelessness in the film. Describe details that help fill in the larger story of who was suffering. What caused the hopelessness? What does such hopelessness look like today?
- God immersed Ezekiel in suffering, among dry bones. How does the Ragman's immersion in suffering differ from Ezekiel's? Does he do this willingly? How is he changed by the experience?

### People of Hope:

The second part of the film becomes much more intimate and personal. The businessman Will follows the Ragman alone and witnesses a life-changing moment of death and resurrection.

- The Ragman brings hope and healing to people, but not everyone follows him. Where does he go? How is his journey like Jesus' journey to the cross?

The Ragman's journey over the bridge mirrors the journey of Jesus through Jerusalem. There, outside the city, among what is cast off from the world, he dies. His wounds mirror not just the physical suffering of Jesus under the Roman soldiers but also the spiritual suffering prophesied by Isaiah (Is 53:3-6).

- Only Will follows the Ragman outside the city. What does Will know that others don't?

Will sees the true cost of healing and hope. The Ragman, a Christ-figure, takes away sin by dying under its punishing load and rising to new life (2 Cor 5:16-21).

Others have glimpsed this new life in the compassion of the Ragman, but only Will sees the ultimate nature of his sacrifice and the ultimate power of his life.

- How does Will respond to the Ragman's death and resurrection? Why is this important?

Will responds to the Ragman in an act of full confession and an experience of full forgiveness. Like Adam and Eve, naked and ashamed before God, Will bares his sin and confesses his lack of hope (Gen 3:7). And like Adam and Eve, Will receives the promise of future redemption and is clothed (Gen 3:15, 21), not in animal skins, but in the righteousness of the Ragman. Will has been buried by baptism into the Ragman's death and raised by him to newness of life (Rom 6:3-11).

This experience of death and resurrection is important because it shapes Will's relationship with others as he returns to the world. Like the apostle Paul before him, Will will share with others a compassionate love that he himself has received (2 Cor 1:3-7).

## Exploring Our Lives

*Read Ezekiel 37:11-14.*

- Where did the vision of a valley of dry bones come from? Why is that good news?

Unlike other biblical visions that proceed from God, this vision arose from God's people. Israel said that their bones were dried up and their hope was lost (v. 11). God took their hopeless nightmare and used it to create his vision of new life.

This means that God is able to enter into any of our hopeless nightmares and bring about new life. Having taken our sin and died under its punishment, Jesus rose from the dead and claims us as his own. We now live under him in his kingdom in hope of the day when he will deliver us from suffering (v. 13).

Until that time, we live as citizens of Christ's kingdom, a people of hope who enter places of hopelessness and transform them into places of God's compassionate love.

- Like Ezekiel, we might assume God will work in certain places more than others. What places do we most associate with God's work?
- Like God in the text and the Ragman in the film, Jesus transforms our vision of God's work in the world. What places of hopelessness surround us where God can work?
- In what specific ways can we be people of hope, entering these places of hopelessness and sharing God's compassionate love?