

The Gospel According to Ezekiel ~ Ezekiel 36:16-36

Introduction

When you think of the word heart, what do you think of? Maybe you think of the organ that pumps blood throughout the body. Or perhaps you think of that common heart shape we see all around us at Valentine's Day. Maybe, especially within the context of the Bible, we think of the heart as the most important part of us. The Bible often refers to a person's heart--both in good and bad ways.

The heart plays an important role in Scripture. Throughout the Bible we can see how God renews and restores people's hearts. When I think of Paul on the road to Damascus, I think of the dramatic heart change that took place within him. Maybe we think of Hannah who eagerly and desperately prayed for a child with all of her heart? She poured out the prayers of her heart, and when God answered them she exalted Him with her heart--her most inner self.

Maybe, we think of how Pharaoh's heart was hardened before the Lord. He had seen many signs and wonders of God, but his heart was hardened. Like stone.

But let's take it a step further. Where is your heart at? How do you think of your own heart? Is it producing the kind of good fruit that Jesus talks about in John 15 or the Fruit of the Spirit that Paul talks about in Galatians 5? Our hearts have the ability to produce both good fruit, but also bad fruit. Our hearts have the ability for both obedience and disobedience. We need to take a hard look at ourselves, and ask where our hearts are at. Do we have an obedient or disobedient heart?

When we look at the prophets, and Ezekiel in particular, we see a people who had turned their hearts away from God. And this had very real consequences for them. So much so, that they were exiled from the very land that God had promised them. But that isn't the end for the Israelites. Let's read what God promised them by turning to Ezekiel 36 starting at verse 16. This can be found in the pew Bible on page 616.

Text: Ezekiel 36: 16-36

“The word of the LORD came to me: Son of man, when the house of Israel lived in their own land, they defiled it by their ways and their deeds. Their ways before me were like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual impurity. So I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed in the land, for the idols with which they had defiled it. I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries. In accordance with their ways and their deeds I judged them. But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, “These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land.” But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the LORD GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, That I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the LORD GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. And I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine among the nations. Then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves

for your iniquities and your abominations. It is not for your sake that I will act, declared the LORD GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for you ways, O house of Israel.

Thus says the LORD GOD: On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the cities to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt. And the land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by. And they will say, "This land that was desolate has become like the Garden of Eden, and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are now fortified and inhabited. Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I am the LORD; I have rebuilt the ruined places and replanted that which was desolate. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it."

Context

At this point in Israel's history, the northern Kingdom of Israel had already been exiled by Assyria, and now the southern Kingdom of Judah was in Babylonian exile. Babylon had set up a puppet king in Jerusalem, but Judah was under Babylonian control. Now Babylon had exiled prominent Jews so that the chance of rebellion was lessened. Ezekiel was among these first exiles. Ezekiel was trained as a priest back in Israel, and in this new found land, God had called and anointed him to be His prophet.

This passage is rich with theology. At first glance, we may see the Lord as a selfish God only concerned for Himself. But when we look more closely, we will see that He is not concerned for His name in a selfish way. He is concerned because Israel's sin has impacted how the other nations view Him.

It is important to know that in the Ancient Near East, land was directly connected to a deity. So in Israel's case, the land that they were living in was related to Yahweh. That means that when the Israelites went into exile, the surrounding nations came to one of two conclusions. The first conclusion that they may have come to is that Israel's God had abandoned them. The second conclusion that they may have

come to is that Marduk, the god of Babylon, was superior to Yahweh. Whatever conclusions the people came to, the fact that Israel left the land affected how Yahweh was seen by the nations. His name, his holy, perfect name, was being dragged through the mud. So if this is the case, why did Yahweh allow His people to go into exile?

The case against Israel has been built against them throughout the other prophetic books, and Ezekiel has also made the case against Israel in earlier chapters. Ezekiel has pointed out how their idolatry has desecrated the land. He equates the idolatry of Israel to a woman during her menstrual period. If we go back to the book of Leviticus, we see the Levitical code taught that this would have made a woman ritually unclean, and everything she touches also becomes unclean. A point of clarification is needed for us 21st century readers. God isn't saying that women are sinful because of this natural biological process. Leviticus 15 also talks about male bodily functions as well and how he becomes unclean. What God is trying to get across here is that these natural process, which lead to life, are tainted by the fall. Original sin, in Ancient Israel, is believed to be passed down through childbirth and this is why women were considered unclean during this time. In the same way Israel is unclean, and has defiled the land that God gave them. Ritual cleansing is necessary for the restoration of the land.

Israel has broken covenant with their God, over and over and over, and God can not let it continue. This is why God is concerned for His name. Israel was a nation that was set apart for God. He has constantly told them that they will be His people, and He will be their God, yet to the nations around them this doesn't seem to be the case.

Because of the sins of Israel, God's name, his very reputation as the Sovereign Lord, is at stake. While the other prophets demonstrate God's compassion and love, the book of Ezekiel is concerned about how the nations will view Yahweh. God's very character is being judged by the nations around Israel. The exile is a direct result of Israel failing the covenant they made with God. Instead of proclaiming God's

name among the nations through observance of the Mosaic Law and worshipping Yahweh, they have done the exact opposite.

The restoration of Israel to the land won't be for them, but for Yahweh himself. God will restore His name among the nations. In order for them to come back to the land, God will renew the Israelites. But how will God restore and renew Israel?

God will restore and renew Israel in two ways--both outwardly and inwardly.

Outer Renewal

An important part of Israel's history was the conquest of the land of Canaan. After hundreds of years in slavery, and decades wandering the desert, it was time for them to claim the promise of God. After the conquest, as things usually do with Israel, things started to go south. They demanded a King, and these kings eventually led to the decay of the pure worship of Yahweh. Inevitably, divine intervention was necessary. As Ezekiel points out, Israel has defiled the land, and it must be cleansed. In order for this to happen, Israel's removal from the land was necessary.

But once again, God, out of concern for His reputation among the nations, promises here to restore Israel to the Promised Land. In order to vindicate His own holiness amongst the nations, God promised in verse 24 to **“will take them from the nations and gather them from all the countries and bring them into their own land.”** Here God is promising three things: to take, gather, and bring. God has promised a restoration to the land that He promised to their forefathers. But He promises so much more. In verses 33-36 state what that will look like. God says, **“On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the cities to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt. And the land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by. And they will say, “This land that was desolate has become like the Garden of Eden, and the waste and**

desolate and ruined cities are now fortified and inhabited. Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I am the LORD; I have rebuilt the ruined places and replanted that which was desolate. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it.”

So here, we have God promising to not only bring the people back to the land, but He is going to restore what was destroyed. The land will be cleansed, and the cities are going to be rebuilt. And not only will the cities be rebuilt, but the waste lands--those places where nothing can grow--will also be renewed. This idea of making the waste lands new is also seen through the prophet Isaiah. (Is. 43:19) This paints a very dramatic picture. I picture a place that is dry and abandoned. Maybe there is broken equipment strewn all around, and in that place, a place that has been left to rot and wither away, is the place that will one day be teeming with life. God paints the picture of how this desolate wasteland will be like the Garden of Eden. A place that has beauty beyond comparison--a perfect place to dwell. But how does this renewal of Israel to the land, and a renewal of the land itself, connect with us in the 21st century?

This part of the prophecy has a 2 part fulfillment. It was fulfilled when Israel went back to the land under the Persian Empire, but its second fulfillment is yet to come. As people who are spiritual children of Abraham, our promised land is coming. When God mentioned the Garden of Eden here in Ezekiel, he is not only pointing us back to how things were at the beginning, but is also pointing us forward to our eschatological hope.

This means that right now, when we look out into the world we are confronted by images of desolation. Whether we see images of war, famine or natural disaster we know that we are not living in what God is picturing here. But if we fast forward to the very end of the Bible, to the book of Revelation, we see a new heaven and a new earth. We see a magnificent city of God that is coming down. A place where all our tears will be wiped away (Rev. 21:4). This city is God's perfect place. A place that is parallel to what the Garden of Eden would have looked like.

God is renewing us with an inner renewal so that one day we can come to that Holy City--the New Jerusalem--the Kingdom of God in fullness.

Inner Renewal

God not only promises an outward renewal of the land to the Israelites, but he also promises something much more personal and intimate. God promises an inward renewal. It is because of the inward renewal that will take place that allows this outward renewal to take place.

So, what is this inward renewal?

Well, in verse 26 God tells that Israelites that He, **“will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”** The reason for the exile and expulsion from the land was due to the Israelites inner being. They were a people who were supposed to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, but reality was far from this. In Ezekiel 8, God shows Ezekiel the detestable things that were happening in the temple. In this vision, Ezekiel sees all sorts of creepy crawly things on the walls and all the idols of Israel. Then in the temple court, the Lord shows Him how 25 men were worshipping the sun. In the very place where God was to dwell among His people, the people turn their very backs on Him and worship idols made by man and creation itself. The hearts of the Israelites were turned away from God.

God sees what their real problem is, and He has a resolution for it. The Israelites problem is their negligent attitude towards Yahweh. The God who brought their ancestors out of Egypt, and gave them the land that they now possess. He is going to perform heart surgery so their hearts will be drawn to Him, instead of the idols they have been worshipping. Their hearts have become hard as stone, and He is going to give them a brand new heart; a heart that is the exact opposite of the one they had, a heart made of flesh. A dramatic shift is going to change in the lives of the Israelites. But that isn't the end, God is going

to put His Spirit within them. This isn't just the Spirit coming upon them for a time like we often see in the Old Testament, but the Spirit will dwell within them, and from this they will walk in His ways. What a beautiful image.

And in the same way, God renews us with a new heart and Spirit. He provides inner renewal to walk in His ways. Jesus promised us that after He ascended that another would come, a helper, the Holy Spirit. God provides a washing and cleaning for our innermost self--our very hearts and lives will be transformed by His powerful Spirit.

It is like these jars here. Here I have one jar, (point to jar with iodine) and it looks filthy. This water represents our hearts. Before we come to know and accept Christ, this is how we are. Our sins stain the depths of who we are. We are a selfish people, full of idolatry. We want to be in control of our own lives. It's not always easy to see, and many think that we aren't like this, but the Biblical narrative tells us that we are sinful. That, no matter our status, ethnicity, or employment, none of us are immune to the effects of the fall. Now, God could leave us like this. But He doesn't. Now this jar, represents the work of Christ and the Spirit in the lives of believers. This jar is pure, perfect and holy. What God is telling the Israelites in this passage is that He is going to pour out His Spirit on us, and His Spirit will dwell within us. And because of this indwelling, we will begin to walk in God's statutes.

(Pick up jar with bleach and pour into jar with iodine).

Now look at the jar that represents our hearts. Because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross we will be made pure and holy before God. This inner renewal will result in outward actions. This promise of restoration to the Israelites wasn't just for them, but it is a promise for us as well. When we accept Christ as Lord of our lives, the Spirit of God comes and dwells in us and we are covered and washed by the blood of Jesus.

But what does heart change look like? Let me tell you a story.

There was this young man and when He was 18 he had a dramatic encounter with the Lord. High School wasn't the easiest for him. It was a time of great change in his life. He was preparing to go to King's University, leaving most of his friends behind. Lots of his friends seemingly abandoned him, and he felt alone, desperate, scared. He felt as though there was no one in the world who understood what he was going through. He started to slip deeper and deeper into despair. Feeling utterly alone, He started to question his faith. Questioning the very foundations of everything he had been taught about God. And he thought to himself, "If I could be feeling this way, how could there be a God who desperately loves me?" In that place of despair God used a mission's trip to bring this man to Him. God removed him from his comfortable home, and spoke to him in the basement of a small church plant in Slovakia. His life was drastically altered in that basement. God reached down and grabbed a hold of this man's life. God broke through the stone heart he had been carrying for months and replaced it with a soft heart. A heart that felt God's Spirit move within him. This is a true story. It is my story. I call that moment in my life the Damascus road encounter. My life has dramatically shifted because of it. Instead of my focus constantly on myself, I try my hardest to always keep God at the center of my life. It isn't easy. When God removes our heart of stone, and replaced it with a heart of flesh, he moves us to action. He moves us to a place of love for Him, from which everything else flows. So what should our response be to this dramatic life change?

It is because of this new heart and Spirit, we can worship God. The text of Ezekiel tells us that the reason behind God giving us His Spirit is so that **"you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." (v. 26)** When we obey God and follow his statutes, we are saying "I offer my life as a living sacrifice. Take me and use me." In that moment, we are glorifying and worshipping God. He wants all of us. He

wants people who worship Him in Spirit and Truth and when we allow Him to indwell in us, we can have that opportunity.

Lastly, because of this new heart and indwelling of the Spirit we proclaim this message of God, and demonstrate His reputation, with everyone we meet. We are a living, breathing, walking representation of the divine message. Our relationship and position before God represents Him. Just like the Israelites were set apart to represent God to the nations, we too, are set apart to represent Him. We have the honor to do this, but we must do it well.

Conclusion

This redemption of the nation of Israel that Ezekiel promises is a great and mighty act of God. God didn't turn His face away from the Israelites even though they turned away from Him. He poured out His Spirit upon them, and returned them to their promised land. And here is the good news for us today. The same God who worked in mighty ways in the life of Israel is the same God that we get to worship today. The same God who parted waters, released an entire nation from slavery, and then gathered them up and brought them back to Him is the very same God we worship. That redemption that we just read about, is available for us today. It looks different, but God is wanting to pour out His Spirit upon us..

Christ is the one who brings all nations before God. When we believe in Christ, God performs heart surgery on us. He takes our heart of stone, removes it from our chest, and replaces it with a new heart. A heart that yearns after Him. So, again I ask, what is your heart like this morning? Is it a heart of stone, cold and hardened by life, or is it a heart of flesh? Take a moment to think about it. If you feel like you do have a heart of stone, ask God to transform you and mold you into the image of His Son. Ask for His Spirit to come upon you. If you feel like you have had this heart transplant, and God has given you a heart of flesh, ask God to reveal to you areas in your life where you are still standing as lord. Then give those areas over to Him. This isn't easy. Like the Israelites, we like to be like the people around us--a people who have

control of their own lives. Let us be a people who are on fire for the Lord God, who proclaim His name among the nations with our lives.

Let's Pray.