

The God Whose Name is Sacred

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Preacher: Rev. Jordan Senner

[0 : 00] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, and your will be done.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. You may be seated. If I were to boil our passage down to one simple statement, I think it would go something like this.

God is committed to his holy name. And everything God does flows out of that commitment. Our whole passage revolves around God's deep and unyielding commitment to his name.

Now we know that names are very important, don't we? When people are pregnant or they have just had a child, the first thing you ask is, is it a boy or a girl? And the second thing you ask once you've discovered that is, what's its name?

What's he or she's name? And we ask that because we believe deep down inside that there's something about names that tell us about who a person really is.

[1 : 13] And if that's true in our world, it was especially true in the ancient world as well. Your name was your identity. Your name revealed who you truly are. It was your reputation, your character, your personality.

In short, your name was everything. And so what we discover in Ezekiel chapter 36 is that everything revolves around a single name. And it's the holy, the utterly unique and pure name of the holy God.

God is committed to his name. And everything God does flows out of that commitment. Now, no doubt, those of you who are here this morning, the faithful remnant, did not expect me to say that at the beginning.

This is probably not why you came to church. At face value, it seems very troubling, right? Does God have some sort of insecurity problem? Doesn't this undermine God's loving concern for his people?

Doesn't this belittle the importance and value of human beings to some extent? And the questions go on and on and on. And I'm not going to answer most of your questions this morning. Just so you know, you can talk to me afterwards.

[2 : 26] But my main hope is that during this sermon, you will actually grow to see that God's commitment to his holy name is really, really good news. It's really good news.

God is committed to his holy name. And that's why in our passage, Israel's sin and Israel's situation is such a deep tragedy. Take a look at Ezekiel chapter 36, verses 16 to 21 with me.

God is faced with a sort of double problem or double tragedy with Israel. The first problem is Israel's impurity. Look at verses 17 and 18. 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 and her menstrual impurity. Side note about menstrual impurity. God does not hate women once a month.

That's just not true. This has a lot more to do with ritual impurity in the Old Testament than it does moral impurity. And if you actually go back to the chapter that this references in Leviticus, there's actually just as much said about men as there is women.

[3 : 38] So don't worry about it. You can ask me more about that later if you want. Continuing in verse 18. So I poured out my wrath upon them. Why? For the blood that they had shed in the land and for the idols with which they had defiled it.

Israel's impurity is twofold. It's idolatry. They have not loved God. And it's bloodshed. They have not loved those in God's image.

Israel has set their hearts on false gods, on false loves, on counterfeit gods, and has led them into impurity. And so we see in verse 19 that God judges justly Israel's impurity.

I scattered them among the nations, says God, and they were dispersed throughout the countries. In accordance with their ways and their deeds, I judged them. And so we see now that Israel is in exile under God's judgment.

And it's actually that judgment that leads to the second major tragedy and problem of this passage. Look at verse 20. The nations are profaning God's holy name.

[4 : 48] Verse 20. When they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, and that people said of them, these are the people of the Lord.

And yet they had to go out of his land. In the ancient Near East, if your nation was defeated, or your nation was disgraced, your people that you belong to, then it automatically meant that your God was defeated, and your God was disgraced.

So it's as if the nations are looking at the people of Israel, who have been kicked out of the land by their enemies, because of God's judgment. And they're thinking, wow, Israel's God must not be very powerful.

Israel's God must not be very good or faithful. They're questioning the character of Israel's God. So God's name is being profaned.

It's being trivialized. It's being mocked. It's being typecast as arbitrary and unpredictable and unfaithful. And this isn't something new.

[5 : 48] This is something we know in our world as well. Let me give one quick example. In his book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins writes this. Richard Dawkins writes this.

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction. Jealous and proud of it. A petty, unjust, and unforgiving control freak.

A vindictive, bloodthirsty, ethnic cleanser. A misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, pestilential, megalomaniac.

A capricious, malevolent, bully. I don't even understand half those words. But I assume that they're really bad. And I don't choose Richard Dawkins just because I have something against him.

It's just because he expresses most intensely what we, because we're polite in modern Western world, often think. A lot of people in post-Christian Western society actually share that sentiment deep down inside to some extent.

[6 : 52] God's name is being profaned among the nations. And this is the great tragedy of Ezekiel chapter 36. This is what concerns God most because God is committed to his holy name.

We see this in verses 21 to 23. Look at 21. But I had concern for my holy name.

Concern. This is a deeply relational, gut-wrenching word. It can literally be translated pity or compassion. In the book of Exodus chapter 2, when Pharaoh's daughter is bathing in the Nile River and she sees in the reeds a little basket or mini ark, she sends one of her servants to go get it.

She opens it up and she sees the baby Moses sitting in this little basket all abandoned and alone. And the text says in Exodus chapter 2 verse 6 that she had pity for him.

It's that feeling of pity or compassion. It's the same word that's being described here. God has pity and compassion on his holy name.

[8 : 04] God continues in verse 22. Therefore, say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God, It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I'm about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you've profaned among the nations to which you came.

God acts out of a commitment to his holy name. And as modern readers, whether you're a Christian or not, when you come to this verse, you're caught off guard.

It seems almost absolutely abhorrent to us and we wonder what in the world is going on. And there's lots of reasons. There's lots and lots of reasons for this. One of them, I think, is simply that the cultural air we breathe is very me-centered or I-centered.

Human life is about being a self-possessed, self-made, self-empowered, self-actualized human person. And this seeps its way into our life and our spirituality in a whole bunch of different ways in our relationships.

And we know it in our lives. So when we come to a passage like Ezekiel 36 and many other passages in the Bible, we're utterly shocked because we realize that the whole story of the Bible doesn't revolve around us.

[9 : 14] It actually revolves around this utterly majestic and holy God. The whole story of the Bible is about God's name, his reputation, his purposes, his glory. So we find ourselves a bit shocked when we come to this passage.

But it's not just because of the cultural air we breathe. It's also because, and I think this is really important, we do not live in an honor-shame culture.

We don't live in an honor-shame culture. So as modern people, when we read this passage, the great scandal for us is that God cares about his holy name and that's his primary concern. That's the scandal.

But for people in the ancient Middle East reading this passage, the great scandal would not have been God's great concern for his name. That just would not have been the scandal. Rather, and this is really important, it would have been the fact that God, it would have been the way in which God expresses the concern for his holy name.

That is the true scandal. Why? In the ancient Middle East, it was an honor-shame culture. Shame is negative, and the avoidance of shame is positive.

[10:25] Now what this means is if your name is shamed by someone, by something they say, or by something they do, then you have to act to defend the honor of your name.

You have to save face. It's not a choice, it's a must. You cannot allow your name to be shamed. And so defending the honor of your name was seen as a good virtue.

That's virtuous. This is still the case in some places in the Middle East. That's why if one country attacks another country, it's inconceivable for that country just to sit idly by and kind of absorb it or absorb it and not do anything about it.

Because their name has been shamed. And they must respond to defend the honor of their name. And the same logic applied to the ancient Middle Eastern gods as well.

If you shamed their name, they would retaliate. They would get you. And so you have this whole sacrificial system that was developed about appeasing the wrath of the gods through these sacrifices.

[11:27] So they wouldn't get you when you shamed their name. So the commitment to the honor of your name was not the scandal in the ancient world. And it's not the scandal of Ezekiel 36 read through the eyes of an ancient mindset.

The real scandal lies here. With the fact that God's commitment to his name leads him to show mercy to the very ones who shamed it.

To the very ones who shamed it. The ancient gods could never dream of doing that. God, instead of turning against those who shame him, he actually runs after them and fights for them and seeks to save them.

The most beautiful picture we get of this in the Bible is the father running in the parable of the prodigal son to the son. The son who squandered all of his goods, who rejected all of his love and who shamed his father's name and yet the father runs after him.

And what we see in this passage is that God's commitment to his name leads him to astonishing acts of mercy. And that's the gospel, friends.

[12:39] That's the gospel. God turns sin completely on its head. God acts for the honor of his name by showing mercy to the ones who shamed it.

Yes, we see all throughout Ezekiel that God judges, but the last word is ultimately a word of mercy. Now, the question is this.

Why does God do this? Why? And the answer is this. Because God has bound his holy name to his people. This is absolutely essential to understand the logic of the passage.

God has bound his holy name to his people. We see this in Exodus chapter 3 when God appears to Moses in the fiery burning bush, which we don't really understand how that happens.

But the fiery burning bush, God appears to Moses and Moses says, what's your name? What's your name? And God says, I am who I am. Which was probably thoroughly confusing for him.

[13:41] And then God follows it up and he says this. I am the God of your fathers, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And it is by this name that I want to be remembered from generation to generation.

God binds his name to his people forever. And that means that when God is committed to his name, he is now committed to his people.

forever. And that's exactly what makes sense of Ezekiel 36. Notice how seamlessly God goes from verses 20 to 23 where he's talking about the honor and care, his care for his name, to verses 24 and following where he talks about his promises for his people.

Seamlessly transitions one to the next. Verse 24, I will gather you. Verse 25, I will cleanse you. Verse 26, I will give you a new heart.

Verse 27, I will put my spirit within you. Verse 28, I will be your God. Verse 29, I will deliver you.

Verse 30, I will make the land fruitful.

[14:48] Verse 33, I will rebuild your cities. And verse 37, I will increase your people. I will, I will, I will. One mercy-laden promise after another comes flowing from the mouth of God.

So much goodness and grace. It's a bit like trying to drink from a fire hose. Or it's like trying to fill up your water bottle at Niagara Falls. Our capacity to receive is far too small, but it's our privilege to try. So I want to narrow us in on just three promises here. Look at verse 25. Fresh cleansing. Fresh cleansing. 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. God is promising total, new, and complete cleansing.

He's promising to deal with our track record. To deal with all of our past sins and all of our idols in mercy. To make us clean to wash us white as snow.

[16:03] And even with the profound wonder of this promise, we find so many ways still to evade its hope. Don't we? We try to deal with our sins in so many other ways.

We try to bury our sins and hide them to keep them secret. Try to hide them from God and from others. And all this really amounts to is leading to failed attempts to ease our conscience. Or a sense of self-deception about who we really are. Or we just slip into this kind of withdrawal into a secret double life. Or we try to do good things to counterbalance our sin, right?

And this can take all sorts of sneaky forms. If my wife and I have been in a particular argument or conversation at a certain time and I've been short or not gentle with her, often, instead of actually confessing it and saying I'm sorry and asking for God's cleansing and her forgiveness, I'll do sneaky ways to try to do nice things to kind of make up for it and cover it up.

So, I'll be like, I'm going to wash the dishes for the next few days. You know, I'm going to get her a bouquet of flowers. I'll buy her some Purdy's chocolates because she loves those. And there's a bunch of subtle ways in which we can do this, right?

[17:22] We can try to do good things to try to hide the sin that actually lies really deep within. And we can just simply minimize the seriousness of our sin.

We say, oh, it's not really that bad, right? Others have done far worse. Actually, I know of a few people and then, you know, God still loves me.

It doesn't really matter. Sense of cheap grace. And all these things really do is not solve any of our problems, just make them worse. They lead us into a deeper place of failure or deceit or secrecy or shame or ultimately despair.

But it's right here in that darkness that the radical light of God's promises break in. Notice the emphasis in verse 25. It does not say you must clean yourselves.

It says, I will cleanse you. I will do it, says God. This is my work, says God. I alone will cleanse you. And notice the scope of God's cleansing.

[18:28] The word all shows up twice. All your uncleanness. All your idols. God is going to go into every nook and cranny of our lives and deal with every uncleanness and every idol.

He's going to cleanse us to the very core. And this is exactly what God did on the cross. In John chapter 13, the night before Jesus was betrayed, we get this beautiful image of God cleansing us. Jesus is eating supper with his disciples and he stands up from supper. He takes off his outer garments. He wraps a towel around himself.

He pours water into a basin. He gets on his knees and he begins to wash his disciples' feet. The son of God, the master, the teacher, washes the disciples' feet.

He gets his fingers in between their grimy, gross toes. And in the ancient world, this was quite a crazy thing to do because your feet were the most shameful and disgusting and ugly and undesirable part of who you are.

[19:34] open-toed sandals, dusty roads, and really, really sweltering hot weather equals ugly feet. And Jesus gets down on his knees and he cleans him.

And he says, this is symbolic of what he's about to do on the cross. God washes feet, friends. God gets into the deepest and dirtiest parts of who you are to wash you clean.

The apostle John was so taken and captured by this image of Jesus that he later writes in one of his letters to the churches, he says, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins

and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

I will cleanse you, says God. I will cleanse you. But that's not it. It gets even better. Look at verse 26. A new heart.

I will give you a new heart, says God. And a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and I will give you a heart of flesh.

[20 : 46] Now the image here is not so much one of renovation or restoration of the heart. Like you're just taking out the insides and remodeling something. The image here is more of a heart transplant.

Listen to the words again. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. For those doctors of you out there, God invented heart transplant surgeries in about 700 BC. Which is pretty sweet. God is like a doctor who's going to take out the defective, clogged, failing hearts of his people and give them something completely new.

And notice how God says a new spirit here as well. This time it's a lowercase s which I think is okay in this particular verse. Two words, heart and spirit in the ancient Hebrew mindset refer to the whole interior world of the human person.

The heart had to do with a person's kind of intellect or will or decision making process. And the spirit had to do with a person's affections or desires or aspirations.

[21 : 55] So what God is promising here is a complete renewal and restoration of the whole interior world of the human person. God's not just going to deal with our past sins.

God is going to deal with the cause of our sins, our hearts. He's going to get straight to the root of the issue, our hard, stony, idolatrous, lustful hearts.

Notice what he's going to take out, a heart of stone. This is meant to communicate a sense of hardness and unresponsiveness to God. Heart of stone. And he's going to give us a heart of flesh. This is meant to communicate the exact opposite. Responsiveness to God. A willingness to be shaped and molded by him in every aspect of our lives. An attentiveness to hear his voice and a desire to want to cherish it.

A deep intimacy and knowing of God. I will give you a new heart, says God. It's wonderful. But that's not it.

[23 : 01] There's still more. It gets even better. Look at verse 27. A new spirit. I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Here, I think it's right to translate spirit with a capital S. This is God's spirit himself. This is the Lord, the giver of life as we said in the creed. I will put my spirit within you.

And what we realize at this point in God's promises is that God is not just restoring Israel to something old. God is actually doing something completely new. He is making a new creation of his people.

I will put my spirit within you. Now, maybe it's just because I'm from a Pentecostal background, but I tend to think that we could benefit greatly from taking this seriously, this gift and this promise a lot more seriously in our lives.

I will put my spirit within you. The spirit of the living God dwells within you, brothers and sisters, right here and right now.

[24 : 17] And that's the same spirit who hovered over the waters at the beginning of creation in Genesis chapter 1. That is the same spirit that was poured out on Jesus Christ in the beginning of Luke and empowers him to resist the evil one when he's tempted in the wilderness, to proclaim the good news of the gospel to the cultural despisers of his time, and to love the outcasts and sinners of his society until it cost him his life.

And that is the very same spirit, says Paul in Romans chapter 8, that actually had the power to raise the crucified and bury Jesus Christ from the dead into newness of life.

And that is the same spirit that dwells in you and me. Do you see the power of the promise of verse 27? I will put my spirit within you.

And notice what the spirit will do. Cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. The great work of the spirit is not some ecstatic experience or emotional feeling. Experience and feelings are not bad. Don't get me wrong. But the text doesn't say that. The text says the great work of the Holy Spirit is the obedience of faith.

[25 : 35] It's godly living. It's holy conduct. It's walking in God's ways and being careful to obey his rules. What the Holy Spirit does in us is it engenders the life and the character and the obedience of

Jesus Christ within us.

That's what the spirit does. And this is so important for us because so often we read the scriptures and we hear God's commands but think we're powerless to do anything in response to them. But here what God is saying is that he's promising to enable and empower us by his spirit to do that which he commands us to do. God wants that for us and why does God want that for us? Because God wants to lead you and me into newness of life. He doesn't just want to cleanse us. He doesn't just want to deal with the cause of our sins but he wants to open up a completely new future for us.

A future of love and obedience and life and joy by the Holy Spirit. fresh cleansing a new heart and a new spirit.

[26 : 46] And just so we don't doubt God's intentions he gives us one final affirmation at the end of verse 36. I am the Lord. I have spoken and I will do it.

Why? Because God has bound his name to his people and God is committed to his name. I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.