

Ezekiel 36:22-38

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[0 : 00] 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. Can people really change? I think many of us have conflicting feelings about this question. On the one hand we like the idea of change.

Every year many of us make New Year's resolutions vowing to set new patterns. Every year hundreds of thousands of books and articles and blog posts are written in order to tell us how to change for the better. How to get in shape. How to find a healthy romantic relationship. How to become a better friend or parent. How to study more effectively. How to be a better leader. The American dream is based on the assumption that anyone can change. That by hard work and with the right opportunities anyone can rise to the top. Maybe you're not happy with your life now. But you hope that moving to a new place. Or maybe getting married or having kids or retiring. Will bring the change that you hope for. We like the idea of change. But on the other hand I think we recognize that deep and lasting change is difficult and elusive.

[2 : 14] William James, early psychologist back in 1890, wrote, In most of us, by the age of 30, the character has set like plaster and will never soften again.

And often the older we get, the less optimistic we become that people can really change. Last year Jeffrey Kotler, writing in Psychology Today, said, I've spent the past 35 years writing books about change, interviewing people about their experiences, researching the features that are most associated with significant transformations that endure over time, and here's my conclusion. I don't know. It's a mystery. A process so complex and multidimensional that it defies understanding. On one level, change is pretty easy.

The hard part is making it last over time. He estimates 90% of attempts to stop a bad habit or even follow through on a New Year's resolution will fail. He then went on to list some of the factors that prevent us from changing.

We overestimate our own abilities. We underestimate how hard it will be to sustain a new commitment. Our environment triggers old patterns. We sabotage our own or others' efforts to change because of fear.

[3 : 29] Often, he says, some of the most deeply life-transforming events are also painful and traumatic events that we would never seek out on our own.

Now, this morning's passage is about change. It's about deep, lasting, heart-level change in people and, by extension, in communities.

The prophet Ezekiel was living at a time when deep and lasting change for the better seemed nearly impossible. He was living in the aftermath of one of the most traumatic and awful events of Israelite history, the Babylonian exile, brought on by the repeated moral failures and spiritual degradation of the Israelites.

The city had been burned. The temple looted and destroyed. The king humiliated and taken captive. The leaders and landowners deported. It was a tragedy.

It was a mess. But Ezekiel and the other prophets said, it was a mess that the people had brought on themselves. If you look up at verses 16 through 19, Ezekiel presents God's perspective on the Babylonian exile.

[4 : 38] And he says when, basically, God says, when Israel lived, when you lived in your own land, you defiled it. You polluted it by your ways and your deeds. So he says, so I poured out my wrath because of their violence and their idolatry.

I scattered them among the nations. He says, in accordance with your ways and your deeds, I judged you. You see, the Israelites hadn't just made a one-time mistake or an excusable error. They had been involved in ongoing and unrepentant rebellion against the creator of the universe. Treason against their rightful king.

Infidelity toward their faithful lover, the Lord himself. The Israelites were God's masterpiece. His very own people who he had chosen in order to display his glory and beauty to the world. And they had polluted the land he had given them. They had dragged his name through the mud. They had blamed God for their failures and taken credit for God's gifts that he had given them.

[5 : 39] They had torn into pieces their covenant with God. And God responded by finally withdrawing his presence from them and sending them into exile. Ezekiel was one of those who had experienced the horror of being deported and marched across the desert for hundreds of miles all the way to Babylon.

He had experienced the horror of the exile. He had seen the death of the nation. If there was any time in the history of Israel when deep and lasting change for the better seemed absolutely impossible, it was then.

They had blown it. God had judged them decisively. And everything they had was gone. There was nothing to go back home to. But very surprisingly, the word that God gave to Ezekiel while he was sitting there in exile was a word of hope.

A word of promise that God would one day bring deep and lasting change for the better in the hearts of his people. Look at what he says in this passage.

Verse 22. He says, You, you have profaned my holy name among the nations. That means you've dragged my name through the mud. Treated it as a common thing.

[6 : 56] But he says, But I, I will vindicate the holiness in my great name and the nations will know that I am the Lord. The Israelites had become just as bad as everyone else. Even though God had called them to display his glory and his beauty to the world.

So God had dealt with them justly. According to their own ways and their own deeds. In the exile, Ezekiel says, You got what you deserve. But he says, Here's the good news.

God's purpose is not to give you what you deserve. He says, It's not for your sake that I'm going to act. He says, God's ultimate purpose is to display his own glory and beauty.

So that all the nations will see and know that I am the Lord. The creator. The redeemer. That there is no one else like me. Israel's reputation was bound up with God's reputation.

And the rest of the world was looking on and saying, Who are all these people who are being marched through our town all the way to Babylon and taken captive? Just like the Babylonians have taken so many others captive.

[8 : 08] Oh, they worship this God, Yahweh? Who's this Yahweh? Well, he let his people be conquered by the Babylonians. He let his city be burned and his land be decimated.

He must not be much of a God at all. No better than the gods of all the other nations that the Babylonians have conquered. And God says, That is not acceptable.

If it was just about giving the people of Israel what they deserved, God could have sent them into exile and been done with them forever. But God says, No, my purpose is to show the world who I really am. And I'm going to do that by restoring you once again.

To be my holy people. To be, to display my holy character to the whole world. So verse 24, he says, I'll bring you back home. Verse 25, he says, I'll wash you clean.

Verse 26 and 27, he says, I'll fill you up from the inside out. I'll give you a new heart. And a new spirit. A heart of flesh. Instead of a heart of stone. A soft and responsive and tender heart.

[9 : 13] He says, I'll put my holy spirit within you. So that you walk in obedience. Verse 28, he says, You shall be my people. And I will be your God. In perhaps the darkest time in Israel's history, when it seemed that all hope had died, Ezekiel proclaimed a message of hope.

That God would one day give his people new hearts. Clean hearts. Spirit filled hearts. You might say, Well, that's a nice promise.

But did it ever happen? Well, approximately 70 years later, many Israelites did return back to Jerusalem from exile. They resettled Jerusalem, rebuilt the temple under Ezra and Nehemiah's leadership.

But that restoration was only partial. Jerusalem was later conquered by foreign armies. The kingship was never restored. The people continued longing for this spiritual renewal that they had tasted, but not yet experienced in full.

You know, if you turn to the New Testament, the New Testament boldly proclaims that Ezekiel's promise was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus the Messiah. In several places, I refer back to this passage.

[10:33] John chapter 3, Jesus was speaking with Nicodemus, one of the Jewish religious leaders at the time. And he said to Nicodemus, famously, You must be born again, or born from above, in order to see the kingdom of God.

He said, You must be born of water and the Spirit. Just like Ezekiel said, cleaned out on the inside, washed clean, and filled with God's Spirit.

And then he said, This is why God sent His only Son into the world, so that all who trust in Him and believe in Him would have life, eternal life, implanted in them and flowing out from them.

As Nick read in the beginning of service, in the service, Jesus promised later in John, He said, If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

And whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. The Apostle Paul brings up this theme several times in his epistles.

[11:45] If you look at 1 Thessalonians, Paul says to the church, he said, You turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God. You've been cleansed from your idols. And then he says, God hasn't called us for impurity, but for holiness.

God's called us to be set apart as His holy people. And then he says, God gives His Holy Spirit to you. He's cleansed us from our idols.

He's called us to be holy and He's put His Spirit within us. He's given us new hearts. Or as Titus says, He saved us.

Not according to our own works, but according to His own mercy. And then he says, By the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit. In other words, He's cleaned us out and He fills us up.

And we poured out on us through Jesus Christ, our Savior. If you look at Ezekiel 36, verse 18, Ezekiel speaks about the people who had rebelled against the Lord.

[12:50] And he said, God poured out His wrath on His persistently disobedient people and sent them into exile. But in the New Testament, in Titus, Titus is saying, Now because of what Jesus has done on the cross, the punishment for our sin has been removed.

And now God has poured out, not His wrath, not His righteous anger against our sin, but His Holy Spirit, His presence, His mercy, His grace on everyone who turns to Jesus as Savior.

In one more New Testament reference, 2 Corinthians 3, 3, Paul says to the church, he says, You are a letter from Christ, written by the Spirit, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of hearts of flesh. It's literally what it says. Sometimes translated, human hearts. It's literally hearts of flesh. God has given us hearts of flesh, new hearts.

Jesus removes our hearts of stone and replaces them with hearts of flesh. He gives us a heart transplant, a radical change from the inside out.

[13:56] Earlier this summer, I ran into a guy who I've known for over 10 years. And for most of the time I've known him, his kidneys were failing. He was on dialysis three times a week.

Every time I saw him, he was groggy. He was weak. He was tired. He walked slowly. He spoke slowly. He slept half the day. And then after I hadn't seen him for a few months, I ran into him while I was walking this summer.

He looked like a different man. He was energetic. He was clear-headed. His speech was different. He had started exercising. He had started working part-time. He seemed like a new man.

And he said, I've received a new kidney. A kidney transplant. Now there was a cost to this kidney transplant. Someone had sacrificed one of their kidneys, which was working perfectly well, so that his dysfunctional kidney could be taken out and replaced.

And a team, a skilled team of surgeons and medical assistants had carefully taken out the dysfunctional kidney and replaced it with a new one. You see, the Bible says that there was a cost for God to give us new hearts.

[15:08] That Jesus Christ died on the cross in our place, giving his life, pouring out his life unto death for us, taking the punishment that we deserve for our sin, so that God might pour his Holy Spirit into our hearts.

God has come in Jesus Christ to give us new hearts. That's the message of this text.

It's the hope that we celebrate at Christmas. And I want to spend the rest of our time drawing out some implications of this message. That God has come in Jesus Christ to give us new hearts.

First, I want to speak to those of you here who are not Christians. Let me speak to you in two groups. First, some of you may be optimists, optimistic about change.

Maybe you have an optimistic view of human nature and human progress. Maybe you believe that people are basically good, or that if we look deep within ourselves, we can find what we need in order to truly change.

[16:15] I want to challenge you that deep, lasting, heart-level change is much harder than many of us think. I think we've seen this at a broader societal level over the last few weeks.

Some of the deeply entrenched racial tensions that remain in our country. Whether or not the police were justified in using lethal force in particular cases, I think the events of the past few months have exposed a long-standing lack of reconciliation.

Racial equality can be expressed in principle through laws and systems, and it's important to consider whether those need to be improved. But racial reconciliation only happens when people's hearts are also turned toward one another.

We have laws officially preventing discrimination on the basis of race and class. We have a president who is black. We live 50 years after the Civil Rights Movement and 150 years after the abolition of slavery, but there are still deep levels of mistrust.

Lack of understanding, lack of love between black and white people and other races in the U.S. And as a white man, I'm tempted to avoid cross-cultural conversations about race because I can feel guilty or defensive about my own inherited privilege.

[17:39] Some of my black brothers and sisters in Christ wrestle with anger or despair that their voice will not be heard. Many of us are afraid to speak honestly, to listen well, to extend ourselves toward people who are different than ourselves and who may disagree with us.

These are all matters of the heart. And change in these areas doesn't come easily. To all of us in the church, in the midst of troubled times, we need to talk with each other, listen to each other, and most importantly, to pray for one another that in the midst of upheaval and turmoil, the church would be a place of hope and reconciliation and representing the faithful presence of Jesus Christ.

You know, the Bible's very realistic about how hard it is for us to change. I think if you really dig in to pursuing whether it's racial justice and reconciliation or combating the global sex trafficking trade or pick any other issue, working with people, with drug and alcohol addictions, you'll see how entrenched our human, even self-destructive patterns are.

How hard it is for us to change. The Bible recognizes both personal sinfulness and systemic injustice, and it says our hearts are part of the problem and not the ultimate source of the solution. The prophet Jeremiah says the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick. Who can understand it? Change is a lot harder than we think at the level of the heart.

[19:20] But you know, the Bible also brings us good news. Maybe you've got to the point where you're pessimistic about change and you don't think anyone can change. And you're cynical. But the Bible says God and His grace can intervene in order to change even the hardest heart.

And I could tell a lot of stories here, but I'll tell just one. There's a rather intense YouTube video that's been making the rounds since last week by a man named David Wood. For many years, people would have called him a psychopath or a sociopath.

He had no feeling for anyone else. His dog died when he was five. He felt no sadness. His best friend died when he was in high school. He thought, so what?

At one point, he wondered if something might be wrong with him. But then he decided that he had evolved to a superior state compared to the rest of humanity. So one day, he choked his friend because of a disagreement.

He watched his mom's boyfriend beat her. And though he could have defended her, he couldn't care less. One night, he came into the room where his dad was sleeping and beat him over the head with a hammer until he almost died.

[20 : 31] He was taken to a mental hospital and finally to jail. In jail, he met a Christian in his cell named Randy. who had turned himself in after 21 felonies. David despised Randy and other Christians.

He teased them mercilessly. Randy would sometimes fast and pray for, sometimes for several days at a time. David, ever the competitor, would go without food a day or two longer than Randy each time to outdo him.

In order to argue against Christian beliefs, he started studying the Bible. One night, after he hadn't eaten for several days, he was reading the Gospel of John and he read Jesus' words, I am the bread of life.

He had spent his whole life searching for liberation from social norms. He was now locked up in a jail cell and he read, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

His health was rapidly declining and he wondered how much longer he could keep this up and he read Jesus' words, I am the resurrection and the life. He said, even for me, this was weird.

[21 : 37] This book was talking to me. After a long process, he finally surrendered to Jesus Christ. He prayed one night to repent of his sin and receive Christ into his life.

And he said, when I sat up, the entire world looked different. Like everything was a different color. For the first time in a lot of years, I didn't want to hurt anyone. And I had a strange sense that I had somehow known the truth all along.

For years, I was willing to sacrifice everything for a freedom from external control. But now I realize that true freedom is found in not having this inclination to turn against our Creator.

After I prayed, I felt like I had been fighting my whole life and I finally had a chance to sit down and rest. And that rest has never gone away. He's now married with four kids and works for a Christian apologetics ministry.

In the conclusion of his video, he quoted this verse. Ezekiel 36, 26. 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.

[22 : 48] Have you experienced that deep, lasting, heart-level rest that doesn't go away? It does not always come in such a dramatic experience that you can point to by date and time.

But Jesus Christ said to all who will listen to Him, come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened by your sin, by your shame, by your guilt, by your fear, whatever burdens you, and I will give you rest.

He says, my yoke is easy and my burden is light. change is possible through the power of Jesus. Second, let me speak to those of us who are Christians.

Let me give three groups. First, if you're a new Christian, if you've recently started following Jesus, if that's you, I want to encourage you to rejoice in this new heart that you've received from God.

Rejoice that Jesus has cleaned you out of your sin and guilt and filled you up with the Spirit of God. The Apostle Peter says according to His great mercy, He's caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

[24 : 03] And he says, in this, you rejoice. Though now, for a little while, you've been grieved by various trials, but though you haven't seen Him, you love Him. And though you don't see Him now, you believe in Him and rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory.

As a new believer, you might have lots of questions about the Bible. You might feel fearful and anxious about what lies ahead. You might be dealing with baggage from a messy past.

God might be convicting you and showing you all the ways that you fall short and all the sinful habits that you need to break free from. And you might be wondering, how in the world will I ever live like a good Christian?

Rejoice. Because God has given you a new heart. And God has poured out His Holy Spirit into you. His favor, His mercy, His love, His grace, and that's greater than any of those things that you're facing.

It's the best gift of all. It's the best reason to rejoice. Because you have a new heart. Second group of Christians, if you've been a Christian for some time but you feel stuck, the joy you experienced when you first believed in Christ, has faded, you're still falling into the same old sinful and

self-destructive patterns, maybe you wonder whether this is even true.

[25 : 28] Do I really have a new heart? Is God's promise true for me? Well, think of it this way. What the Bible is saying is that through the mercy of Christ, we've had a heart transplant.

Now, I don't know if you've ever had any kind of radical surgery, but if you've had major surgery, you don't walk out of the hospital dancing and jumping for joy and ready to run a marathon. More often, you go out like Jacob after he wrestled with the angel all night, limping. And there's a long process called recovery before you experience the full benefits of an organ transplant. Doctor sends you home. Take not an organ and say if you have a knee replacement, doctor sends you home, you've got your new knee. But then you have to do a series of exercises over the next several weeks and months that feel painful and hard until you gradually begin to experience the benefits of your knee replacement.

Now, for a Christian, spiritually speaking, the process of adjusting to and living out of your new heart that God has transplanted into you by His Holy Spirit, that process takes a lifetime until you die or until Jesus comes again.

[26 : 55] Some of us have had, many of us have had the heart transplant from Jesus, but we've gotten stalled or discouraged somehow in the recovery process. Sometimes we've stopped following the doctor's orders.

And so we're not experiencing anywhere near the full benefits or not seeming, not growing in experiencing the benefits of the new heart He's given us. But if you've turned to Jesus in faith, His promise is still good.

He's given you a new heart. He's implanted a new principle of spiritual life within you. He's put His very own spirit into you. And God doesn't go back and do reverse surgeries.

You have a new nature even if you don't feel like it. So instead of complaining that you feel just as bad as you did before, you need to get up out of bed and do the exercises that the doctor has ordered and stretch yourself like the doctor has told you to because that's the way you'll grow stronger.

That's the way to get used to and live out of that new principle of life that's been implanted in you. That's what Peter says in his epistle continuing that same passage. He says, prepare your minds for action.

[28 : 09] In other words, get ready for a fight, for a struggle. It's not going to be easy because you have a new nature but it's fighting against your old nature which is hanging on to you and trying to pull you back.

But he says, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you when Jesus comes again. He says, don't be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance but be holy in all that you do. He says, love one another earnestly since you've been born again and like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk of God's word that by it you may grow up into salvation.

So that's what he says. He says, long for God's word. Love one another. Take practical steps to be involved in others' lives. Recovery is not a solitary process as a Christian.

God's given you a new heart. He's also given you a new community. We need to work out together what that looks like. But God's given you a new heart. So be encouraged.

[29 : 18] Paul says, not only has God renewed our hearts but he also says our inner self is being renewed day by day. God gives us a new heart and then he continues renewing us by his spirit day by day by day by day.

It's an ongoing process of his grace and mercy being poured into our lives. And our call is to work out what God has worked into us.

Finally, let me speak to those of you who've been Christians for some time and now you're on the homestretch. Maybe you're in the second half of your life, perhaps in your later years, perhaps facing health problems or other reminders that your physical body is not as strong as it used to be. And one day we will all die. What I want to say to you is this. The new heart that God has given you is a prelude. It's an anticipation.

It's the first fruits, as the New Testament says, of God's promise of a resurrected body and eternal life in God's new creation. You see, the heart of Ezekiel's promise in this chapter is that God will give his people new hearts.

[30 : 31] But if you look, if you read the rest of the chapter, what I didn't read, even look at verse 29. He starts talking about the land being restored.

The land that was desolate would one day become abundantly fruitful. The cities would be inhabited. The waste places rebuilt. The desolate land would become like the Garden of Eden. And the people would multiply like a flock.

It's a promise of a new creation. Come back next week, Pastor Nick will be preaching the whole sermon on. But the point I want to make here is that the new heart that God has given you is the down payment, it's the guarantee of what he's going to do one day in making a whole new heavens and new earth.

nor will we live with Jesus forever. The Apostle Paul makes this connection. 2 Corinthians 4, he says, so we do not lose heart.

Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

[31 : 45] As we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. And then he goes on. He says, for we know that if the tent that is our earthly home, our physical body right now is destroyed, we have a building from God that will last.

A house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent, this temporary body, in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

And then he says this, he who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. God's given you his Holy Spirit to dwell in you, to renew your heart day by day as a guarantee of his promise that one day he's going to make all things new.

Amen. You can say amen. We're in a Baptist church. It's alright. It's worth affirming this promise of a new creation.

So brothers and sisters, God's given us new hearts, cleansed from sin and filled with his Spirit so that we may know that one day he'll give us new bodies and a new creation and it'll be glorious. That's the promise we hold on to in this season of Advent.

[33 : 13] We think about anticipating the coming of Christ. That's the promise that we hold on to and look forward to. That's the hope that we have.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that though in our sinfulness we cannot change ourselves in that deep and lasting and heart level way.

We thank you for sending your son Jesus Christ so that we might have new hearts. We thank you for his sacrifice, for his coming into this world for his laying down his life on the cross, for his body broken and his blood poured out so that we might receive life.

Lord, we thank you for your promise that one day you will come and make all things new. Lord, we pray that you would renew our hearts day by day.

We pray that you would sustain us by your grace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

[34 : 43] Well, this morning we come to the Lord's Supper where we remember the sacrifice theately sermon of Shelby that should satu replied.