

NEW HEART

SERIES: KNOWING THE GOD OF
JUSTICE AND HOPE



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Ezekiel 36:16–38
10th Message
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Ezekiel 34: 1–31

Anatoli Admanishin, a higher-up in the old Soviet Union, said this on the verge of the collapse of his government: “To alter the world is difficult; to alter human beings is almost impossible.”

The prophet Ezekiel would agree with the difficulty of changing human beings. He preached to human beings a lot and got no results. But he’s given a decidedly different message to preach in Ezekiel 36, one that contains hope that his countrymen will, at last, be responsive to the Lord. The message that he preaches is especially relevant for us, for what Ezekiel envisioned has come upon us.

Change—positive change in the lives of human beings—is possible, more than possible. How does it come about?

His name profaned

Ezekiel 36:16-21:

The word of the Lord came to me: 17 “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. 18 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. 19 I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries. In accordance with their ways and their deeds I judged them. 20 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.’ 21 But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.

Because of the Israelites’ persistent idolatry, the Lord raised up Babylon to conquer Jerusalem and remove them from the promised land, thus scattering them among the nations. However, this created a problem for the Lord. His name—that is, his reputation—was damaged among the nations. The assumption was that the Lord had either abandoned his people or that he wasn’t powerful enough to defend them against the Babylonians and their gods.

The Israelites don’t seem to care about the reputation of the Lord—indeed, they have profaned his name. But the Lord has “concern” for his reputation. He cares about how people outside Israel perceive him. Indeed, he wants to reach the nations through Israel. So, what’s he going to do about it?

The Lord acts for his name

Ezekiel 36:22-23:

“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. 23 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.

The Lord will act for the sake of his reputation—to vindicate the holiness of his name among the nations so that the nations may know him. In that, the Lord will not act for the sake of Israel, which has profaned his name, and in that he will vindicate his holiness through Israel, we’re left to wonder: how will all this come about? If his people are in a state of “uncleanness,” how will the Lord vindicate his holiness? What are we to expect? Another wave of judgment against the Lord’s rebellious people? The end of the line for Israel as the people of God?

Gathered and cleansed

Ezekiel 36:24-25:

I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. 25 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.

What? The Lord, who scattered his people among the nations, will defend the holiness of his name by bringing them back to the promised land? Well, yes, his name was sullied among the nations because his people were exiled from the land. But they were exiled from the land because of their persistent idolatry and all the evil that proceeded from it. They were exiled because of their uncleanness. The Lord will take care of that problem, however, by cleansing them from their sins. If they've been cleansed, they can reside in the land once again. More importantly, the Lord can reside among them once again—and in a new and more powerful way.

Keep your conduct honorable

Today, God is no less concerned for his name, nor is he any less concerned for the nations—that is, for those who don't yet know Jesus. Likewise, he wants his people to know him and walk in his ways so that the nations may know him and walk in his ways.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. (1 Peter 2:9-12)

And if we fail? If we, like Israel before us, profane his name by not walking in his ways? The writer of Hebrews says, "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and

since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:19-22)

If we fail, draw near to God, hiding nothing, confident that the cleansing work of Christ qualifies us to do so.

Yes, God cleanses us—and more.

New orientation

Ezekiel 36:26-27:

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. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Ezekiel has preached for Israel to repent until he's blue in the face, but Israel has not responded. The Israelites need something more than what the prophet can give them. The words "heart" and "spirit" stand for one's internal orientation, from which decisions and actions proceed. Israel's problem is a severely warped and deeply ingrained orientation that has made them unresponsive to the Lord. In their hearts and their spirits, they have been unwilling, or unable, to respond to him.

Just as the Lord will take care of their unclean state by cleansing them, he will take care of their severely warped and deeply ingrained orientation by giving them a new, soft heart and putting a new spirit within them. In fact, the Lord will put his Spirit within them. The Lord will not only reside among them, but he will also reside in them. He cleanses them, as if they were a temple, so that he can reside in them.

This operation will orient the Israelites toward the Lord and make them responsive to him, causing them to walk in his ways.

The Spirit reorients us

It's difficult to understand what was available to the exiles. The Spirit must have been available to them in some way.

It is not difficult to understand what's available to believers in Jesus, however. What God promises for his people in Ezekiel has been realized with the coming of Christ, who cleanses us from sin and sends the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has been poured out: he dwells in us and among us, both individually and collectively (Acts 2:33, 1 Corinthians 6:19, Ephesians 2:22). The Spirit reorients us, in the deepest parts of our being, toward God, making us responsive to him, enabling us to walk in his ways.

How does the Holy Spirit do this? Listen to the apostle Paul: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). If someone you like also likes you, wouldn't you like to know about it? The advice I want to give a young man who is interested in a woman is this: Just tell her. What does God do? He just tells us. He just tells us he loves us. He pours his love into our hearts, and he tells us he pours his love into our hearts.

What changes a human heart? Love! What does the Spirit do? He pours God's love into our hearts! The Spirit floods our hearts with the love of God, pushing out self-rule on the one hand and self-hatred on the other, enabling us to respond to God's love so that we cry, "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:15)

"Abba" was an Aramaic word for "father." It was used by children, but also by adults when they spoke to their fathers in an intimate and trusting way. Jesus, of course, used this word for the Father in Gethsemane: "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). We don't always use the word "Abba" when responding to God's love, of course, but we respond to his love in an intimate and trusting way, with the sense that we are daughters and sons of God.

The Spirit inspires us to relate to the Father in an intimate way. As the Spirit floods our hearts with the Father's affections, they spill over in our response to the Father. We therefore feel free to share with the Father anything that comes to mind, from joys and praises to sorrows and laments. The Spirit also inspires us to relate to the Father in a trusting way. We trust the Father, heartache by heartache, prayer by prayer, failure by failure, with our entire lives, even while knowing that if we pray "Abba" in Gethsemane, the answer may be a cross on Golgotha.

At no time are we unable to cry out "Abba Father." If we have new hearts and new spirits, and if the Spirit dwells within us, there's something within us—something good and holy and beautiful—that is always moving within us. Can you feel it? The Spirit is always about relating us to the Father. There will be occasions, however, when we sense his movement in profound and, quite often, unexpected ways. It's as if a window opens and we find ourselves gazing upon the Father, if only for a moment.

You do the connecting

The Holy Spirit makes us responsive to God, enabling us to walk in God's ways as he reorients us toward God. Remember, God is not interested in obedience. He's not interested in the kind of obedience offered up by the dutiful but resentful older son in Jesus' story in Luke 15. He's not interested in the obedience offered up by some scribes and Pharisees, who honored God with their lips even though their hearts were far from him (Matthew 15:8). No, God is not interested in obedience; he's interested in obedience from the heart, the kind of obedience that emerges from a relationship with him (Romans 2:15, 29).

The Spirit is about the relationship, about showing us God's love and bringing us closer to him in a Father-son or Father-daughter relationship. As we understand at deeper levels who the Father is, and as we become more intimate with him, we are changed. We can't help but be changed. The Spirit orients us toward God, with the result that we walk in his ways.

As our friend Jan Johnson says, "You do the connecting; he does the perfecting." You don't do the perfecting; you don't walk in God's ways. That's God's work. He puts his Spirit in us to "cause" us to walk in his ways. No, you do the connecting; you relate to God. You draw near to him. "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" (James 4:8).

What are God's ways? If the Spirit pours the love of God into our hearts, he does so not only so that we might love God in return but also that we might love others. As John puts it, "We love [others] because he [God] first loved us" (1 John 4:9). If God pours love into us, love spills out of us—love for God, love for others. The ways of God concern self-giving, self-sacrificing love.

Johnson elaborates:

*The key to getting rid of stubborn habits and ingrained character flaws—the tendency to criticize, complain and procrastinate—is to build an interactive life with God. Instead of trying to be good, we connect with God to let God transform us into Christlikeness. As we do the connecting with God, God does the perfecting in us.*¹

‘I’ve got you’

Coming out of college, baseball pitcher R.A. Dickey was on the verge of signing his first professional contract. He received an \$810,000 offer from the Texas Rangers. A believer, Dickey was praying before entering the office of the general manager to sign the contract. After he entered the office, the general manager informed Dickey that a medical exam turned up some concerns about his throwing arm. The general manager rescinded the offer. Dickey tells the story:

I don’t feel devastation or even anger. I feel rage. Complete rage. It feels as if it starts in my toes and blasts upward through my body, like a tsunami, into my guts and right up through the top of my head.

I have an urge as primal as anything I have ever felt.

I want to reach across this desk and strangle this man who, very quietly, very dispassionately, has just taken everything I’ve worked for, taken my whole life’s dream, and crushed it as if it were a bug on the pavement. I want to cuss and tell this man exactly who he is.

But I do not lift a finger. I do not leave my chair. It’s as if there’s a strong hand on my shoulder holding me back, giving me pause.

In that instant, I have self-control that wasn’t there a moment earlier.

I hear a voice:

‘Relax, I’ve got you. Relax, R.A. It’s okay. It’s going to be okay. I’ve got you.’

*The voice is the Holy Spirit. The restraint is the Holy Spirit. I was just talking to God in prayer on the balcony, and now He is talking back, bestowing on me a composure that could not have come from anywhere else.*²

But what if you don’t have self-control? What if you don’t hear a voice? What if you unload on the guy? God still loves you, right? He cleanses you, right? You still have a relationship with him, right? You draw near. You open your heart to the Father, who delights in hearing what’s on your heart no matter what’s on your heart. You cry “Abba! Father!” You trust the Father, heartache by heartache, prayer by prayer, failure by failure, with your entire life. You thank God for his all-forgiving, soul-transforming love.

Indeed, you connect with God. Also, we connect with God.

‘You shall be my people’

Ezekiel 36:28-32:

You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. 29 And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. And I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. 30 I will make the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field abundant, that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. 31 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. 32 It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord God; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel.

The Lord invokes his covenant refrain, “you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” The Israelites will not simply return to the promised land; the promised land will be productive once again—abundantly productive. In fact, the Lord will act in such a way that they will “never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations.” By providing so abundantly for his people, the Lord will restore his reputation among the nations.

What about his people? Finally, they will repent! They will “loathe” themselves because of their evil ways. Earlier, the Israelites were only sorry for themselves: sorry that they were suffering because of their sins (Ezekiel 33:10). Now, the Lord says they will be sorry for their sins. They will repent because of the Lord’s grace: because he cleansed them, because he brought them back to his land because he gave them a new heart and put his Spirit within them, because he made the land bloom again.

The nations take note

Ezekiel 36:33-38:

“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. 34 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. 35 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.’ 36 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. 37 “Thus says the Lord God: This also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them: to increase their people like a flock. 38 Like the flock for sacrifices, like the flock at Jerusalem during her appointed feasts, so shall the waste cities be filled with flocks of people. Then they will know that I am the Lord.”

The land will not only be productive again, the places that had been devastated by war will be rebuilt, fortified, and inhabited. Before the Israelites ever inhabited the land, it was imagined as a place like the garden of Eden, flowing with milk and honey. The devastated land will become again what it once was. Once again, the Lord will act for his people in such a way that the nations will take note. Moreover, the land will be bustling with people once again.

Once again in Ezekiel, the Lord invokes the refrain, “Then they will know that I am the Lord.” In Ezekiel 1-32, he invoked the refrain in light of his judgment of Israel. Israel would know the Lord through his judgment of them. Now, on the other side of judgment, Israel will know the Lord through his restoration of them.

Shared relationship

The covenant refrain that appears in Ezekiel also appears in the New Testament, with inconsequential variations:

— “For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people’” (2 Corinthians 6:16).

— “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Hebrews 8:10).

We relate not only to God as individuals but also as a people. We have a shared relationship with God. Together, we are his temple. Together, we are his people. Together, we relate to God. This means that every believer in every part of the world is part of the singular people of God. Because you can’t know every believer in the world, this shared relationship with God is best expressed in local churches and the smaller communities within those churches. To find a group at PBC, go to www.pbc.org/communities

The Lord often makes me aware of, and appreciative of, our shared relationship with the Lord on Sunday mornings. On some days, I’m plagued with some dark thoughts when I pull up to the church. Perhaps what is commonly called “spiritual warfare” is involved. Then as I walk toward the worship center, I hear the band practicing, and I’m encouraged. Then one of the brothers or sisters in the back fits me with a microphone. Then I go over the images with another brother or sister. And I’m encouraged again. Then we pray together before the service starts, and I’m encouraged again.

Oh, yeah, I’m not in this alone. I’m part of a people. I share something extraordinarily powerful with an entire community of people, and when we come together to worship God, well, there’s nothing like it.

The Holy Spirit pours God’s love into all of our hearts, together. Together, we cry out, “Abba Father.” Together, we walk in the ways of God, bringing his healing love to each other and the world.

“Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I am the Lord.” Many people come to the Lord because they sense the power and love of God not so much from an individual believer who leads them to Christ but from a community of believers who are following Christ. That’s how I came to the Lord. That’s how I saw people come to the Lord when I led the Young Adult Fellowship at this church.

Something stirring

You do the connecting; he does the perfecting. We do the connecting; he does the connecting.

There is something good and beautiful and holy stirring in each of us. There is something good and beautiful and holy stirring among us. Maybe you can feel it. Maybe it feels something like this:

Relax, I've got you. Relax. It's okay. It's going to be okay. I've got you.

Endnotes

¹ Johnson, Jan. "The Soulcare Project." *The SoulCare Project*, <https://thesoulcareproject.org/directory/jan-johnson/>. Accessed 19 Nov. 2017.

² Dickey, R.A. *Wherever I Wind Up*. Blue Rider Press, 2012. 98-99.

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