

The God who renews

Readings: Ezekiel 36: 22 – 38 and Romans 8: 1 - 11

Text: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”
(Ezekiel 36: 26 - 27)

[Slide 1] [Ezekiel 36: 22 – 38] The writers of the Old Testament knew a thing or two about writing well. Not only does every word and image seem well-chosen for their significance and the insight they can bring but the structure of the stories, chapters and even whole books seems to have been meticulously planned. As such, the Old Testament and its companion collection, the New Testament, are magnificent and impressive pieces of literature. While it's not on everyone's "top ten" list of Bible passages, this section of 16 verses from chapter 36 of the book of the prophet Ezekiel which we've heard read is an excellent example of well-constructed literature. Reading and then reflecting on this passage gives us some valuable insights into the condition of God's people – and we're going to explore that today.

[Slide 2] From what we discover in this chapter of the book of Ezekiel, it's obvious that God's people have moved away from God and embraced lifestyles that were far from holy. Yet, **in his mercy**, God confronts them about their wrongdoing. In a move that's typical of God throughout the Bible, especially throughout the Old Testament, having told the people that their conduct fell **far** short of what he expected of them, God says he'll restore them. He'll cleanse them, give them a new heart, relocate them to where they were meant to be and he'll grant them new motivation to follow his ways and keep his laws. Basically, God sets out a manifesto for restoring his people to all the good and positive things that a life in tune with God's wishes should bring us.

[Slide 3] So, this is a hugely encouraging passage of Scripture. It's especially encouraging for us if we've ever tried to do our own thing, live life our own way and then found ourselves in a similar place to that of the Israelites in Ezekiel's time. It could be when we find another god to worship – for example, money, fame and/or status. Then we realise that not only are the so-called benefits of worshipping this god insubstantial and ultimately unsatisfying but we're spiritually impoverished by so doing. We're spiritually impoverished because we're walking away from God and the things he prizes: goodness, fairness, righteousness, love, compassion and so on. Through Ezekiel, God says that - because of his love for us - he'll clean us up. He'll put us on another path. This path leads to a new and bright destination. He'll put a new spirit in our heart and he'll ensure our life is filled with his blessings by replacing the drudgery to which we've grown accustomed. The starting point for this new life needs to be a personal acknowledgement of our life's mistakes - mistakes we all make from time to time - **and** a willingness to let God lead our life from now on.

[Slide 4] [Psalm 119: 25 – 32] Another part of the Old Testament which, like Ezekiel chapter 36, is literary gold and focuses of humanity's imperfect relationship with God, is all 176 verses of Psalm 119. For example, each verse in the section of verses 25 to 32 of this psalm honours God. Recognising his present state in life, the writer calls on God to "fix" him. The writer doesn't openly admit any sin but he makes an impassioned plea to God and surrenders his soul to God in obedience. The psalmist acknowledges his imperfection, albeit covertly, as he says such things as, "My soul is weary with sorrow... keep me from deceitful ways... I've chosen the way of truth... I hold fast to your statutes... I run in the path of your commands..." (*Psalm 119: 29 – 32*). We can learn an important lesson from this psalmist. Many of us only think of changing our lifestyle when we hit a crisis – perhaps it's an illness, a death in the family, the loss of our job, a breakdown in family relationships or something similar. Yet the psalmist makes it clear we **don't** have to **wait** to be pushed into a closer walk with God because of crushing life events. We can make the decision to follow God when things seem to be going well for us. Out of simple gratitude, we can give our lives to him - not even because of what God has done for us (which is, of course, an awful lot) but just because we recognise who he is.

[Slide 5] [Romans 8 : 1 – 17 (and 1 – 39!)] If we move into the New Testament, we find similar sentiments - most notably in chapter eight of Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Paul begins the chapter with those now well-known words: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because, through Christ Jesus, the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and flesh" (*Romans 8: 1 – 2*). Paul states that, as a result of our faith in Jesus, we're no longer condemned for what we've done. That **doesn't** mean that what we've done is OK. **Nor** does it mean there are **no** consequences to be worked through and our faith in Jesus gives us *carte blanche* to behave in any way we like. After all, when Jesus assured the woman caught in adultery that she wasn't condemned, he added that she should sin no more (*John 8: 11*). But the **really** good news is that knowing we're **not** condemned introduces hope for us into an otherwise hopeless situation. We **know** we've sinned. We know we've made mistakes in our life and we've fallen short of what God wants of us. And we **know** that sin leads to eternal death and separation from God and all that's good. We also know that sin condemns us to a life of futility such as Solomon speaks about at the beginning of the book of Ecclesiastes. Reporting the words of 'the Teacher', Solomon writes, "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless" (*Ecclesiastes 1: 2*). A better translation of the Hebrew word "hevel", usually rendered as "meaningless", might be "smoke" – giving us the image that everything to do with our lives, and all that the world puts value in, is ephemeral and insubstantial. Yet, despite this, **knowing** that our sin no longer condemns us **transforms** that state of affairs. It means we're **not** the victims of forces beyond our control. It means we **can** address our sinful nature with energy and with a determination to change. We **can** face those we've, perhaps, hurt in our sinfulness and offer not only an apology but heartfelt restitution. Basically, things about our life **can** change and we can change with them. Through our faith in Jesus, we're **not** condemned for our mistakes but - as God says in Ezekiel chapter 36 - we receive a new heart; we receive new motivation to follow God's ways, and, so, we're restored to eternal fellowship with God. This means our life is now transformed. We now know our destiny is with God and we'll enjoy all the good things he's prepared for us. That makes the journey of our life "doable", hard though we know it may

be. And it's doable because Jesus, by his Spirit, joins us and lives in us, confirming us as part of God's family.

[Slide 6] These passages – from Ezekiel 36, Psalm 119 and Romans 8 – were written centuries apart. Yet they show us a **consistent** picture of God and his relationship with humanity. They confirm the diagnosis that humanity keeps making mistakes. Left to itself, humanity's fate is hopeless but the good news is that God takes the initiative and, when we respond to that initiative - most recently God's initiative of sending Jesus to live among us and demonstrate how God wants human beings to live - we can be encouraged and we can take hope. Ezekiel chapter 36 is one of Scripture's clearest declarations that God restores his people **not** because they deserve it, but because **he's** faithful, holy and determined to bring life where there's been ruin.

[Slide 7] From this passage in Ezekiel 36, we can notice three key things: **(1) God's restoration is public, not private.** Ezekiel repeatedly says God will act "for the sake of (his) holy name... before the nations" (*see Ezekiel 36: 22 & 23*). This indicates that the people's restoration isn't just personal healing. It's about God's reputation being renewed through his people's transformation. This should suggest to us that God's work in us is meant to be **visible**. Our renewal by God becomes a signpost of **God's** goodness to the world. When God restores his people, the world sees a different kind of life - characterised by mercy, integrity, compassion and holiness. Or, as Paul writes in Romans chapter 8: "For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed" (*Romans 8: 19*). Second, we can see **God's promise of fruitfulness and flourishing**. Ezekiel speaks of: ruined cities being rebuilt; desolate land becoming like the Garden of Eden, and flocks filling the streets again. These images aren't just agricultural. They're symbols of emotional, relational and spiritual flourishing. This emphasises to us that God doesn't **merely** forgive. He rebuilds. God doesn't **just** clean the heart. He cultivates joy, purpose and fruitfulness. God's restoration **isn't** minimal. It's abundant. Third, we can recognise **the new heart and new spirit as ongoing transformation**. The Hebrew idea of "heart" (*lev*) encompasses will; desire; imagination, and a moral centre. The Hebrew word "spirit" (*ruach*) signifies motivation; inner drive; breath, and animating force. So, in Ezekiel chapter 36, God is promising not only forgiveness but a re-wiring of people's inner life. This connects with Psalm 119's longing for God's ways and Romans 8's Spirit-led life, with Jesus' promise of the Spirit as our Helper and Advocate (*see John 16*).

[Slide 8] So, what does all this mean for us, here and now? **For people who feel stuck** and feel they can't change their life's circumstances or their responses to those circumstances, Ezekiel chapter 36 says: 'You're **not** stuck. **God** can do what you can't do.' Many people today feel trapped by: habits; fears; shame; exhaustion, and cynicism. This passage says: God specialises in unsticking 'stuck people'. **Then, there are people today who feel spiritually numb.** The "heart of stone" metaphor is a perfect description of conditions we know only too well today: burnout; apathy; disappointment with God, and emotional shutdown. But God **doesn't** just say: "Try harder." Instead, God promises "I'll give you a heart that **feels** again." **There are people today who feel their failures define them.** Ezekiel's audience had made a mess of things. God's response **isn't** rejection; punishment and abandonment. Rather, it's: "I'll **cleanse** you... I'll **restore** you... I'll **rebuild** you." **This** is the

gospel in Old Testament form. **There are people today who're longing for meaning.** The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes gives us the image that everything to do with our lives, and all that the world puts value in, is ephemeral and insubstantial. Yet Ezekiel 36 says life **isn't** smoke; life **isn't** meaningless; life **isn't** futile - because **God** is building something in you that will outlast the world's emptiness. And then, there's a message here, in Ezekiel chapter 36, **for the church community.** We need to notice that Ezekiel's promises are **plural**. He talks about 'all of you'; your land; your cities; your people. This passage reminds us that God restores **communities**, not just individuals. God – through his renewed, restored and revived people - rebuilds churches, families, friendships and neighbourhoods. God's Spirit creates a people who shine with his presence.

[Slide 9] [A People with New Hearts] Ezekiel 36 isn't just ancient prophecy. It's God's heartbeat for his people today. It tells us God **isn't** finished with us. He's **not** resigned to our failures. He's **not** defeated by our stubbornness or our selfishness. He's the God who restores, rebuilds, renews and revives. He takes what's desolate and makes it fruitful. He takes what's broken and makes it whole. He takes hearts of stone and makes them beat again. And he does it **not** because **we're** worthy but because **he's** faithful. He does it **not** because we've earned it but because his love refuses to let us go.

[Slide 10] Romans 8 claims that this restoration reaches its fullness in Jesus. He's the one who removes condemnation; the one who fills us with his Spirit and the one who leads us into life. So what should **we** do with a promise like this? We open our hands. We open our hearts. We open our lives. We let God do, in us, what we can't do ourselves. We let him cleanse what needs cleansing. We let him rebuild what's fallen down. We let him plant hope where despair has taken root. We let him write his law on our hearts and breathe his Spirit into our bones. **And then...** and then we live as people who've been restored - people whose lives point to God's goodness; people who shine with his presence; people who carry his hope into a world that's aching for renewal. So, this week, choose one place in your life where you need God's restoring work. Name it. Offer it. And let the God of Ezekiel, the God of the psalmist, the God of Paul and **your** God - begin his rebuilding in you. Because he's **still** the God who makes all things new. And he's **still** the God who makes his people shine. May this, indeed, be our experience. Amen.