

The Heart of the Matter

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 December 2023

Preacher: Jonathan Middleton

[0 : 0 0] Today's reading is from Ezekiel chapter 36, starting at verse 16. That's on page 868 of the Church Bible. Ezekiel chapter 36, starting at verse 16.

Again, the word of the Lord came to me. Son of man, when the people of Israel were living in their own land, they defiled it by their conduct and their actions. Their conduct was like a woman's monthly uncleanness in my sight.

So I poured out my wrath on them, because they had shed blood in the land, and because they had defiled it with their idols. I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered through the countries.

I judged them according to their conduct and their actions. And wherever they went among the nations, they profaned my holy name, for it was said of them, these are the Lord's people, and yet they had to leave his land.

I had concern for my holy name, which the people of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone. Therefore, say to the Israelites, this is what the Sovereign Lord says.

[1 : 0 8] It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them.

Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Sovereign Lord, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes. For I will take you out of the nations.

I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.

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.

Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors. You will be my people and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleanness. I will call for the corn and make it plentiful and will not bring famine upon you.

[2 : 2 3] I will increase the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field so that you will no longer suffer disgrace among the nations because of famine. Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices.

I want you to know that I'm not doing this for your sake, declares the Sovereign Lord. Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, people of Israel. This is what the Sovereign Lord says.

On the day I cleanse you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns and the ruins will be rebuilt. The desolate land will be cultivated instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass through it.

They will say, This land that was laid waste has become like the Garden of Eden. The cities that were lying in ruin, desolate and destroyed are now fortified and inhabited.

Then the nations around you that remain will know that I, the Lord, have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I, the Lord, have spoken and I will do it.

[3 : 29] This is what the Sovereign Lord says. Once again, I will yield to Israel's plea and do this for them. I will make their people as numerous as sheep, as numerous as the flocks for offerings at Jerusalem during her appointed festivals.

So will the ruined cities be filled with flocks of people. Then they will know that I am the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thank you, Phil, for reading to us.

And do keep your Bibles open at Ezekiel chapter 36 on page 868. It would be a great help to me and to yourself. Well, let me add my welcome to Simon's and let's ask the Lord for help now as we come to his word.

Let's bow our heads in prayer. Lord God, in our weakness be our help.

By your Spirit, draw near to us as we draw near to you in your word. Give us ears to hear your tender voice.

[4 : 52] Encourage us. Challenge us. And transform us. For we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, how often, how many times this past week or so, how many times do you wish that you'd done things differently?

Wish that you hadn't said that thing? Wish that you hadn't done that thing? Wish that you hadn't put your foot in it again. Well, sometimes we do these things deliberately, don't we?

There's an impulse in us. We do things that we know we're not supposed to do. And we go ahead and do it anyway, despite ourselves.

Or don't do the thing that we know we should do. There's a rebellious, self-destructive streak in us, a destructive impulse in us.

[5 : 50] And there's a short story by the 19th century American author Edgar Allan Poe that describes this. It's got an explanation for this impulse.

And by the way, he's credited with inventing the modern detective genre. So he influenced Arthur Conan Doyle and Charlotte Combs and all sorts of things like that. But in his short story, The Imp of the Perverse, the narrator describes this tendency in each of us, this self-destructive impulse to do what we know is wrong, to do the thing that we know we shouldn't do.

And in this short story, it's personified as this kind of imp, this sort of mischievous spirit that lives inside our consciences and makes us do the things we know we shouldn't and which causes you to commit acts of self-destruction and commits you ultimately to commit acts against God, the imp of the perverse.

The Bible has a different way of describing it. And it's right here in the middle of our passage, this self-destructive tendency, the root of it is in verse 26. We're told our problem is we have a sick heart.

We have a heart of stone, it says in verse 26. We have a sick heart. That's a human condition. That's the root of our problems, each and every one of us.

[7 : 23] And the only treatment, the only remedy for our malfunctioning heart, our only hope is a radical intervention by God.

So it says in verse 26, it says, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh.

So this is a radical surgical intervention we're talking about here. What's needed is a heart transplant. And God promised to perform heart surgery on us, removing our diseased heart of stone and replacing it with a functioning heart of flesh.

And we've got three headings this morning. They're on the sheet that you were given on the way in, if you find that helpful for taking notes on. The first heading is this, diagnosis.

We're examining why God's people need a new heart. That's the diagnosis, verses 16 to 21. And secondly, we're looking at the transplant itself, considering the profound change that a new heart entails.

[8 : 41] And then thirdly, we're going to be thinking about the prognosis, what our prospects are with a renewed heart. And the focus of our time this morning will be on that middle section, thinking about the heart transplant itself.

So firstly, then, the diagnosis. Why do we need a new heart? And in verses 16 to 18, we're given a bit of an insight into the symptoms of a sick heart when it's left unchecked and it's a mess.

And so we're told in verse 16 that Israelites defiled the Holy Land with their conduct. What did they do? Well, two sins are singled out here, but it's probably not exclusive to this.

Two sins are singled out in verse 18. They committed idolatry. They worshipped the false gods in the surrounding nations. They committed idolatry like that.

And then secondly, they committed murder, causing bloodshed throughout the land. And that's what happens when a sick heart is left unchecked.

[9 : 55] It's what happens with the twisted narrator in Edgar Allan Poe's short story. He ends up committing murder. And it's from our sick hearts that evil issues. And that's what Jesus tells us in Mark's Gospel.

Jesus says, And so this is appalling, isn't it, in Zehiel chapter 36.

The people, while they lived in their own land, in the Holy Land, were not just thinking evil thoughts, but they were acting on them and doing them. It's really a descent into a heart of darkness, polluting the land by their bloodshed, painting it red with blood.

Now, we're told that there's nothing more boring than watching paint dry. Well, that probably is true in most circumstances. But when I recently went to the Crown paint store to pick up some paint, there'd been an explosion in the kind of oven, the place where the paint's mixed.

And the whole thing had burst open. The paint was spreading out over the entire shop floor and covering absolutely everything, sullyng everything it meant. All the stock was gone.

[11 : 28] And I tell you, the guy in there who was looking after a shop on his own, the language that was coming out of his mouth was not pure and clean, I can tell you. But here in Ezekiel, he's not comparing the sins of the people of Israel to spilled paint, unfortunately.

He's comparing it rather shockingly in Ezekiel 36, verse 17, to that of the ritual impurity of a woman during menstruation.

Their conduct, it says, was like a woman's monthly uncleanness in my sight, declares the Lord. And so, well, this is kind of jarring, isn't it, to our modern sensibilities when we read it.

We think Ezekiel's a bit of a provocateur. He says controversial things. He doesn't pull punches. But we have to remember that here it is the Lord who's speaking through Ezekiel.

So maybe when you read this, you're thinking, is God in some way against woman? Is God anti-woman? Well, no, he is not.

[12 : 42] And when it comes to bits like this in the Bible that are led back to other parts of the Bible, it's always worth checking the wider context. And here, the reference is to ritual purity, the ritual purity laws in Leviticus 15 that governed how God's people, male and female, were to be cleansed before approaching the holy living God in his holy dwelling place, the temple.

And in these Levitical laws, a woman's monthly period was considered defiling to a woman, just like other things were considered defiling to men.

Not because in any sense it was sinful, but because according to these ceremonial laws, any contact with the realm of death made you unfit, temporarily at least, for contact with the realm of life.

What's shocking about what Ezekiel had done, what's shocking, is that the holy people in the holy land had committed these unholy acts of murder, turning it into a place of death, making it unfit for the living God to dwell there with his people.

So they couldn't remain in God's holy presence, and God couldn't remain in theirs. So that's the reason for their exile, that's why, verse 19, they've been scattered among the nations.

[14 : 25] They're acting like they belong to the nations around them, and so God says you want to live like that, you want to live like the pagans and the nations around you, well then you can go and do that. You can go and live there, I'm going to send you out among them, and if you're going to behave like them, you can jolly well go and live with them among them.

And I think there's a warning in here for us too. It's often easier, isn't it, for us to kind of blend in, rather than living distinctive Christian lives, it's easier for us to blend in with those around us, with the culture and its values and its ideals around us.

And how often are we guilty of not living as the holy people of God? And so the appropriate punishment was exile.

But exile, while well-deserved for the people of Israel, came with its own problem. It was an invitation for scoffers, an opportunity for the people and the nations around them to mock God, to ridicule him, and profane his holy name, verse 20.

They'd point at God's people in exile, and they'd say, look, here's the Lord's people. Here's the Lord's people, but what are they doing? They're not in the Lord's land anymore.

[15 : 44] Does your God even exist? We can imagine them saying. And so as long as his people were scattered, as long as they were scattered in the nations around them, they continually profaned his name simply by being in exile, not because of anything in particular they're doing at this point, simply by being in exile instead of the land of promise.

The Lord God is not having any of it. His concern for his holy name, verse 21, means he's going to act, and he's going to act decisively. He's going to take matters into his own hands.

The question is, how can God bring them back from captivity when he sent them there as a just punishment for their sins, a punishment that fitted the crime?

Well, one thing's for sure. The Lord God cannot bring them back without a profound transformation in his people's heart. What's required is a heart transplant.

So that leads us on to our second main section. Before we go on, let's just note that God's motivation here for taking radical action, God's motivation is not out of mercy, not out of mercy primarily for his people, out of mercy for his wayward people, but to vindicate his own holy name.

[17 : 21] And so do you see this idea bookends this middle section of our passage. In verses 22 to 23 we read, it's not for your sake, people of Israel, it's not for your sake, but for the sake of my holy name that God says he will act.

And then again, emphatically, in verse 32, I want you to know that I'm not doing this for your sake, declares the sovereign Lord.

So that's pretty humbling, isn't it, when we think about it. It's not because we're in any way deserving that God acts, it's because of God's concern for his own reputation.

That's why he's willing to save a people who are thoroughly not deserving of being saved. So that's the bookend, the brackets of this section, God's concern for his holy name.

And right in the middle, verse 26, which we looked at at the start, the problem, the problem is a sick heart, a diseased heart, full of sin, a heart of stone.

[18 : 31] And what's required is a radical inward change, not dealing just with the outward symptoms and superficially like that, but a profound change from the inside out.

And a heart transplant is a massive operation. Now, many of us here at St. Silas have been praying over the past year or so for Jonathan Rosen and his family.

His picture might come up on the screen. And Jonathan and his wife, Veronica, are missionaries in the Czech Republic serving with Josiah Ventures out in the mission field there.

And last year, he was diagnosed with a sick heart, with a rare disease called cardiac AL amyloidosis.

And because his heart was already so damaged by this rare disease, by the time of the diagnosis, because it was already so badly damaged, the only way to treat it was with a heart transplant.

[19 : 42] A heart transplant's the only way to save Jonathan's life. And when he got this news, he's been married just for four years, and his little daughter's just a year old.

If it had gone undiagnosed, he was basically given a year to live. He was basically a dead man walking. On the 23rd of September, he received his new heart.

He was given a new lease of life. And the heart transplant was a success, and remarkably, he's been back home with his family since October.

So isn't that amazing? An incredible, miraculous answer to prayer. A new heart. And of course, there's a shadow there as well.

In order for him to gain a new heart, it meant that somebody else had to die. So he received his new life, his new heart, because somebody else didn't.

[20 : 52] And without this surgery, it's possible he wouldn't be here today. With a new heart, he's been given a new lease of life, a new outlook on life.

Now, a medical heart transplant is a massive undertaking, a major surgery. But a spiritual transplant, a spiritual transplant of the heart is even more radical, an even more profound intervention.

And God's people need a new heart if they're to be reconciled to him. Now, there are at least five radical changes that a new heart affects on us.

And we're going to look at these in turn, quite briefly, five transformations, amazing transformations in our lives. And then, after we've looked at these five under our last main heading, we're going to see a couple of ways that our outlook is also transformed when we're given a new heart.

So we're going to look at these five radical transformations in our lives, and then looking in the last section a couple of ways that our outlook is changed for all eternity.

[22 : 09] So the first radical transformation. We're transformed from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh. And through Ezekiel, God promises to renew the hearts of his people.

So this is the heart transplant itself in verse 26. Let's read this amazing promise again. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

So God promises to extract from us our sick, calloused, hardened heart and replace it with a functioning heart of flesh, a healthy heart.

This isn't something that we can somehow do for ourselves. The initiative is on God's part. It's something that God and God alone can do.

It's a creative act of God. And most amazing of all, it's a promise that's already been fulfilled. And it's a promise that's been fulfilled in your lives here this morning if you're a Christian.

[23 : 20] So I wonder if you've ever thought about that before. When you become a Christian, when you invite Jesus into your life, you get a new heart.

Have you ever thought about that? It's similar to what Paul says, the Apostle Paul, when he says, a Christian is a new creation.

The old is gone, the new is here. So if you're a Christian, if you trust that Jesus died in your place, then you are a miracle, a recipient of a heart transplant.

God has performed a spiritual transplant in your heart. So that's the first thing. Second amazing transformation is this. We go from impure to clean.

God's people had tarnished themselves and sullied themselves with sin. And we've all done things, if we're honest, that are utterly reprehensible in the eyes of a holy God.

[24 : 24] Our sin means that we're like filthy rags before the living God. I must have been about nine or 10, I would guess, when I first went to a scripture union camp with a school friend one summer down in Skoll off the coast of North Berwick.

When my mum came to collect us, she appeared and she was absolutely horrified when she clapped eyes on us. We were absolutely caked in mud.

I think we'd spent the week rolling around, playing football in the field and out on the beach and we were absolutely covered in mud. And I think she suspected that we probably hadn't washed for the entire duration of the nine days or however long these things used to last back then.

The impression was that we hadn't washed. When I got home, I don't think I was allowed anywhere near the house before being hosed down thoroughly in the garden, absolutely caked in mud.

Here in verse 25, God himself promises to give us a good old scrub clean. Actually, it's more tender than that, isn't it? God says, I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean.

[25 : 48] I will cleanse you from all impurities. And again in verse 29, I will save you from all your uncleanness.

So there might be all sorts of reasons that you're sitting here this morning feeling unclean, tarnished, sullied by sins from your past or sins that other people have committed against you.

The Lord God here says he wants you to know that in Christ you have been made clean, washed clean by his blood as we sung earlier.

Well, that's the second thing. Third amazing transformation is this, where we go from being banished from God's presence to indwelt by his Holy Spirit. So when God's people were sent away in exile, they feared that they'd forfeited his Holy Presence.

But here the promise of a new heart is coupled with the extraordinary promise of a new spirit in verses 26 and 27. It says, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.

[27 : 04] I will put my spirit in you. A spiritual transplant. And it's a spiritual heart transplant which results in the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, dwelling in us.

Every Christian receives the Holy Spirit. It's a promise that was realized with the birth of the church in the day of Pentecost. Tied in with this, then, it's a transformation fourthly from being wayward to obedient.

And in Hebrew, the heart isn't just the seat of the emotions, it's all that's inside us. It's the seat of the will, it's where we think, where we decide, and will. The spirit is the life breath, the driving force that empowers our hearts, our aspirations, our attitudes, and our motivations.

And as a result of the spirit's indwelling, our desires change, don't they? Our desires shift. That's what it says in verse 27. When I put my spirit in you, I will move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

So what's so amazing about this kind of heart transplant, what's so amazing about this heart transplant, is it's completely idiot-proof.

[28 : 36] It's completely idiot-proof. So think about it. If we're left to our own devices, it's a complete and utter disaster, isn't it?

When it depends on us, we consistently fail. Consistently fail to live the way we're supposed to live. But here, the promise of God's spirit dwelling in us enables us to pursue holiness in a way that simply wasn't possible before.

So every time you're saying, no, I'm not going to go there to the particular temptations that used to trip you up, that's evidence, isn't it, of the Holy Spirit dwelling in you, acting in you.

Evidence, isn't it, of the Holy Spirit at work. Every time you remember your sinfulness, verse 31, and loathe yourself, thinking that your sins are ever before you, again, that's evidence of a changed heart, a renewed heart.

before, before, we had an impulse only to do what is wrong. Now, that we often fail and fall short, we have an impulse to do what is right and pleasing to God, at least some of the time.

[29 : 55] And then, our fifth amazing transformation is that we go from alienation, from alienation to relationship with God. Some new purified heart means that we're no longer estranged to a holy God.

In fact, a renewed heart means that we're a renewed people, renewed relationship to God, a new covenant relationship to God, verse 28. You will be my people, and I will be your God.

The people of Israel were not simply sick in need of a treatment, they were sinners needing reconciliation, to a holy sovereign God.

So isn't this wonderful then? Because of our transplant, we can enjoy so fully a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus as new covenant people.

As we speak to him in prayers, we listen to him through his word, as we come together in our growth groups, in our roots groups, and study his word together, we have a renewed relationship with God because of our new hearts within us.

[31 : 02] So these are the five radical transformations that are part and parcel of being given a new heart, of our incredible promise of a new heart that's now fulfilled in Christ, of getting a new heart.

But not only are we changed ourselves in and of ourselves, but our prospects are changed too. And this leads us onto our final section.

So in medicine, prognosis is the anticipated outcome, the likely course of a medical condition that it will take.

Without our new heart, the prognosis is not good. It doesn't look good. We face judgment and the eternal wrath of God.

But with our spiritual heart transplant, the prognosis radically changes. We move from the realm of death to the realm of life.

[32 : 05] And our prospects change radically for the better. And so we close with these two amazing promises that we as Christians can enjoy now in part and when Christ returns in full measure.

Promise number one, it's a transformation from exile to Eden. In verses 33 to 36, we see there's a rebuilding here from the rubble.

The ruins will be rebuilt, the desolate land will be cultivated, the desolation and devastation in verses 16 to 21 will be restored. All that was defiled and desolate before is renewed and made good.

And it's portrayed here in terms of a restoration to Eden. They will say, verse 35, this land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden.

It's a picture of rebuilding and restoring the land such that it resembles the pristine condition of the garden of Eden. And so in this sense, it points us back to the beginning of the Bible and to Eden, but in another sense, it's not simply a return back to Eden, but points us forward to a newer and a better than Eden because promise number two is that we go from being scattered to being gathered.

[33 : 32] Accompanying this promise of a new heart, God promises to reverse the scattering of his people. And so in verse 24, he says, I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land.

And we're given a picture of what this looks like in verses 37 to 38. It's portrayed as a great ingathering of a vast number of people. I will make their people as numerous as flocks of sheep.

And so the picture here is of Jerusalem and the great feast days. You basically couldn't move. The narrow streets of Jerusalem were teeming, crammed full with people and the flocks of animals brought for sacrifice.

He's saying it's like that here. Except instead of sheep, it's people. The picture is of a garden city. And in place of just two people, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the new garden city will be filled with flocks of people.

Flocks of people with transplanted hearts. In a creation restored to perfection, living life as we were always meant to.

[34 : 57] With his sick heart, Jonathan Rosen was given just a year to live. That was the diagnosis. With a new heart, he has the rest of his life to look forward to again, serving the Lord Jesus Christ wherever he's called.

If you were diagnosed with a sick heart medically, surely you'd want to seek treatment as urgently as possible.

The urgency, friends, is even greater when it comes to our spiritual heart disease. If your heart remains hardened to the gospel this morning, the prognosis isn't good.

But that all changes. It all changes radically and for the better when you invite Jesus into your hearts and ask him to remove your heart of stone and replace it with a new heart.

Because when you do that, your eternal prospects change and get to live in light of that hope now. And so what if you are already a Christian, already a miracle of a heart transplant?

[36 : 19] If you have received that good news already, if you've received a new heart and a new spirit, where does that leave us? It leaves us amazed, truly, amazed at the grace that we've been shown by the holy God, given a new lease of life to serve him all our days, empowered by the spirit that dwells within us to serve him and ascribe glory to his holy name.

And with that, we turn to him in prayer before Ailey and the band lead us in a couple of Christmas songs that are expressive of our hope of salvation.

So let's pray. Pray. not for our sakes, but for the sake of your holy name among the nations.

Father, create in each of us here a pure heart and renew a steadfast spirit within us. Cast us not from your holy presence or take your holy spirit from us.

Restore to each of us the joy of your salvation and grant us a willing spirit to sustain us as we serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

[37 : 44] And Lord God, will you do this for us? Will you make us as numerous as sheep? Through the witness of your people here at St. Silas with flocks of people come to know the Lord Jesus and be given new hearts and receive your spirit.

Not for our sakes, but for the sake of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose holy name we pray. Amen.