

Heart of Flesh or Heart of Stone

Text: Ezekiel 36:25- 27

A Sermon by Rev. David Johnson

This is Memorial Day weekend, and I'm struck with the quality of our military men and women, and the level of self-sacrifice so many of them share. To willingly leave the comforts of what you and I consider as necessities, and submit to all sorts of extremes is awe-inspiring. It's indeed a fraternity of the brave understood only by those who've shared in those experiences and hardships.

But as I ponder that select brotherhood, I can't help but think of how much our military technology has changed over the decades. No longer are we limited to hand-to-hand combat, nor even bombing runs by aircraft with areal spotters. Today's soldiers have to be ready to fight an enemy standing in plain view, or possibly lying in wait miles away. In some cases, the admonition of "Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes" has been replaced by a soldier flying a drone with a joystick in his hands, and a video screen on his desk. But not every technical idea has been successful. I remember a story I read several years ago that displayed this.

Apparently, a Navy fighter shot itself down in a test flight over the deserts of Nevada. It was testing new wing-mounted cannons. The plane was flying at supersonic speeds; however, the rounds he fired were subsonic. You can probably see where this is going. What happened during the test was both ironic and absolutely unnecessary. The fighter actually shot itself down with its own shells. The jet was traveling faster than its ammunition.

We may shake our heads and wonder at this lack of planning. We may chuckle at the irony, or the simple stupidity of a situation like this. But are we any different? Bad things happen to us, and our first reaction is to blame something, or someone else. When in reality, it is usually due to our own mistaken judgment or outright sin.

This is the very case of the Israelites in our Old Testament text today. They had turned their backs on God, lived in disobedience, and fallen from God's favor. They had abandoned the faith of their godly ancestors and had, instead, played the harlot with false gods. And because of this, God had brought great humiliation and punishment on them. He had allowed the foreign nation of Babylon to conquer and enslave them for their terrible wickedness; a wickedness not that different from our own.

Ezek 36:17 "Son of man, when the house of Israel was living in their own land, they defiled it by their ways and their deeds; their way before Me was like the uncleanness of a woman in her impurity. **18** "Therefore I poured out My wrath on them for the blood which they had shed on the land, because they had defiled it with their idols. **19** "Also I scattered them among the nations and they were dispersed throughout the lands. According to their ways and their deeds I judged them. **20** "When they came to the nations where they went, they profaned My holy name, because it was said of them,

'These are the people of the LORD; yet they have come out of His land.' **21** "But I had concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations where they went.

The people of God may have been discouraged in their hopes of a restoration. After all, they knew their sin. They knew that God's discipline was just, and His anger deserved. They had become a public embarrassment to God and His reputation.

But did the people of Israel truly understand the depth of their sin? Did they really appreciate that they had not only "acted wickedly," but irreparably damaged God's character in the process. So lest the Israelites (or we) begin to think they somehow deserve the favor and kindness of God, the Lord explains his motivation:

Ezekiel 36:22-24 "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 My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. **23** I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord," declares the Lord God, "when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight. **24** For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land.

Sometimes we think of sin as only a singular offense; the independent breaking of individual rules. We are so used to compartmentalizing our offenses. We speed, and understand the offense of a broken law, but we don't think of it as a slight on our character as a whole. In fact, we can be guilty of a host of sins, and still consider ourselves as basically "good people."

But God doesn't let people off the hook that easily, and neither did Jesus; as we see in His Sermon on the Mount. He was clear that the eternal consequences of both murder and insults are the same, damnation. Likewise, God's justice towards adultery or private lust are the same, hell. And this judgment is just, because the basis for such severe judgments is the same; all offenses, all sin is a compromise of the name and character of God. For God to simply wink at sin, and leave it unpunished would be to make Himself and His character a laughing stock. He would be the ultimate Enabler if He made a rule and didn't actually enforce it, or discipline the offender.

However, rather than delivering judgment and utter destruction, God's plan was to provide mercy, in the midst of punishment. In fact, our Old Testament text is a promise of grace towards His beloved Israelites, imbedded in a declaration of condemnation. Remember, God's discipline is never empty retribution; it is always restorative in design. God desired to work a change of heart in the Israelites while they lived in bondage under Babylon. God would use an oppressive situation to bring about a humbling in the Israelites, as He often does with us.

But rather than abandon us in that desperate situation, God will always rescue and restore when the straying

heart is turned once again to Him (*see the Prodigal's story in Luke 15:11ff*). God's Word is filled with promises for those who will hear the commandments of the Lord and obey them. This is exactly what is seen in today's text:

Ezekiel 36:25-28 Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶ Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. ²⁸ You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God.

In this short section of scripture, and the verses immediately following, God promises to work many things into the Israelites, as well as providing for them. He promises to work a deep, 4 stage cleansing in His people.

1. God promises a cleansing (washing) from sin.

Ezek 36:25 "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.

This simple statement references the foundational principles of spiritual cleansings, or baptisms, we see in both the Old and New Testaments. They are physical washings that create a spiritual wholeness or sanctification in both vessels and people.

Psalms 51:7 Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. (also Ex. 30:18-21; Num. 19:17-19)

Heb 10:22 let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled {clean} from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (also Matt. 28:19; Acts 22:16; Eph. 5:26)

Now, there are those in Christendom who give little credence to baptism; God's divine working through water. However, both the Old and New Testaments command it. And the purpose in both is the same; personal cleansing and purification. It was not simply a symbolic act; it was the means by which God applied a literal spiritual transaction, resulting in cleansing and acceptability.

We must remember that it is not the water alone which does this miraculous cleansing. Luther himself explains: "Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God's command and combined with God's Word." St. Augustine expresses the same truth in the words: "When the Word is connected with the element, then the act becomes a Sacrament(sacred)."

Through the Word of God and the water, the Holy Spirit cleanses the soul, purifying it from all corrupt thoughts and intentions. It even restores our misplaced priorities and mistaken faith.

John 3:5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. 6 "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Titus 3:5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit,

2. God promises a new heart and a new spirit.

Ezekiel 36:26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you...

Now, some might ask, "Heart, Soul, Spirit...What's the difference?" And much time could be spent on the issues. But suffice it to say that in the Old Testament, *Leb* "heart," *Nepes* "soul," and *Ruah* "spirit" are almost interchangeable, with the exception of the Holy Spirit. The heart often references the feelings, intellect, and understanding. The soul similarly is that intangible inner part of us that is the seat of emotions, thoughts, personality, etc. While the spirit is that eternal part of our being which empowers and enables us. In any event, God promises to renew each, through the process of cleansing.

Ezekiel 11:19-20 And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, ²⁰ that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God.

3. God promises a heart of flesh, not a heart of stone.

Ezekiel 36: 26I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

A heart (*soul*) of stone, insensitive and unable to respond to God, is also unable to love and serve Him sincerely. But a heart of flesh is soft and tender, with a spiritual sensitivity and a desire to obey the will of God.

4. God promises to give the ability to live Godly lives.

Ezekiel 36:27-28 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. ²⁸ You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God.

We as humans not only wrestle with sin itself, but also with our fleshly rebellion and a general lack of motivation towards the will of God. Because of this, our loving Father has also promised to redeem our desires. He has promised that His Holy Spirit will indwell us, furnishing us with wisdom, divine will, and active power, adequate for every good work (2 Tim 2:2; 2 Tim 3:17). We need not fall prey to the wiles and deceptions of the enemy.

And like the people of Israel, God has not only washed us clean, restoring our hearts, but He has also empowered us to live Godly lives for His glory. May it not take an exile to move us to that end.