

Ezekiel 36:16-38 “I Will Vindicate My Holy Name”
Psalm 138
Hebrews 10

January 23, 2011

This is a rather unusual message of salvation.

It is not intended to comfort God’s miserable people.

“they have shamefully trampled underfoot the grace of God”
and so “have forfeited all rights to compassion.” (Block, 352)

Ezekiel would not gravitate towards the common evangelistic opening,
“God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.”

Ezekiel would be more likely to say,

God is repulsed by you, but for the sake of *his* holy name, he’ll save you.

Often we approach God as though we are doing him a favor by believing in him.

Worse yet, we talk to other people as though they should “check God out” –
as though they should “give him a try” –

assuming that God would be only too pleased if they should deign to “accept him”
as Lord of their life.

Iain Duguid rightly points out that the only reason that we have survived on this planet (p421)

“is not because we somehow merited God’s favor
or because God’s love is more powerful than his wrath
and he could not bear to see such delightful creatures as us utterly exterminated.

The *only* reason for the continued existence of human beings on this planet
is God’s commitment to his eternal plan sovereignly to save for himself a people.”

At the center of the book of Ezekiel is Yahweh himself.

He has been shamed by his peoples’ sin and rebellion.

But he will act in the end.

“Nowhere else in the Bible is it made so clear that it is not out of love, duty, or forgiveness
that YHWH restores Israel, but solely for the sake of his own reputation.” (Andrew Mein)

The centrality of God’s name is also found in Psalm 138.

Sing Psalm 138

Hebrews 10

What’s your problem?

Your problem is that you persistently, willfully, and recklessly disobey God,
flaunt his commandments, worship other gods, commit abominations,
and therefore, far from being some “holy” people –
you are the worst of all people!

Because of you, God’s holy name is profaned.

That's Ezekiel's message to the exiles in Babylon.

Oh, and by the way, Paul says in Romans 3 that this is equally true of you!

1. The Problem: God's Name Has Been Questioned(v16-21)

God is faithful – he does what he promises.

But Israel has sinned, and so God must deal with their sin.

But when God deals with their sin, then it will appear as though God has given up on his promises.

a. At Home, the House of Israel Defiled Their Own Land (v16-19)

Verses 16-17 require some explanation:

¹⁶The 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.

In Leviticus 15, God had said that a woman was unclean while she was menstruating.

The OT laws regarding clean and unclean are largely about proper function.

You may recall that in Genesis 2 we heard about what Eve does to help Adam.

Adam had been called to “be fruitful and multiply.”

Adam cannot do that without Eve!

Eve's childbearing ability is what is unique about her.

And in Genesis 3 it is precisely that childbearing ability that is affected by the curse (pain in childbirth), *and* is the focus of redemption (the seed of the *woman*).

And so, not surprisingly, menstruation is important fact of life in the OT.

When a woman menstruates, it means she will not have a baby.

Likewise, when a man has a discharge, it means his seed will not result in a baby.

In other words, the proper function of these bodily fluids is procreation, and so when they did not fulfill their proper function, they rendered the OT person unclean.

And according to Leviticus 15, everything that a menstruating woman touched also became unclean.

Now, what was the effect of being unclean?

One who was unclean could not participate in the worship of God.

Or, as Iain Duguid puts it,

“Communication with the living God through the various Old Testament means of grace was impossible as long as one was in a state of impurity.” (414)

Communion with God is impossible so long as you are unclean.

This is essential for understanding what Ezekiel is doing.

Ezekiel is comparing Israel to a menstruating woman.

In the same way that everything a menstruating woman touches becomes unclean,
so also everything Israel touches has become unclean.

Why?

Because Israel is unclean!

God had told them in Exodus 19 that Israel was a holy nation –
set apart from the nations for him.

But Israel has not lived like a holy nation.

The purpose of the holiness code was to distinguish between Israel and the nations.
So for instance, there were unclean animals – just like there were the unclean nations.

And then there were clean animals – just like Israel.

And among the clean animals, some were acceptable for sacrifices –
just like the priests.

But God wanted to show Israel that these categories were not necessarily permanent!

The holy – the clean – could become unclean!

And Israel, through idolatry and bloodshed,
has become unclean.

In other words, Israel is no better than the nations.

And therefore, Israel has forfeited the right to live in the holy land.

Note verses 18-19:

¹⁸So 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. ¹⁹I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries. In accordance with their ways and their deeds I judged them.

There are two reasons for this judgment:

“the blood they had shed in the land”

and “the idols with which they had defiled it.”

(and remember that Ezekiel’s word for idol is “pellets of dung”!)

Bloodshed and idolatry – in other words,
a failure to love neighbor, and a failure to love God.

Moses had repeatedly warned Israel that bloodshed and idolatry profanes the land.

The land will be defiled by blood.

The land will be defiled by idolatry.

And because they had defiled the land, God scattered them among the nations.

I want you to see that Israel was exiled because they defiled *the land*.

We saw last time that God addresses the land and promises *the land* that he will restore it.

The land is not the problem.

The house of Israel is the problem!

In the same way, the created order is not the problem today.

The problem today is the house of Adam, you might say.

God made all things good –

and insofar as they are God's handiwork, they are still good!

The curse came upon creation *because of us!*

As created by God, the creation is good –

humanity is good –

the land is good.

But those good things that God made have been defiled – *by us*.

Corruption and defilement have spread throughout the creation

because of sin – because of us –

because of our idolatry and bloodshed.

Our worship of created things does not therefore make the created things evil.

The land is defiled – but that does not change the fact that the land is good.

And to make this point clearer, look at verses 20-21:

b. In Exile, the House of Israel Profaned My Holy Name (v20-21)

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.*

Israel has profaned God's holy name.

Does this mean that God's name has become profane in itself?

By no means!

God's name is still holy!

It always has been – it always will be!

But *they* profaned it.

The people of Israel have treated God's name as common.

So, just as the land is a good thing that has been defiled by human sin,

so also God's name is a holy thing that has been profaned by human sin.

But *how* has Israel profaned God's name?

Notice that it is not because of their wicked actions in exile.

It is simply the *fact* of their exile that profanes God's name!

Notice verse 20:

*“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.’”*

How does this profane the name of Yahweh?
Because it makes God look bad!

When God has to bring judgment on his own people –
it makes God look bad!

God had given the Promised Land to his Chosen People.
Land – Seed – God’s presence with his people –
All this is supposed to go together!

And so when the Chosen People are unable to reside in the Promised Land,
that profanes God’s holy name – it makes it common.

Imagine a conversation between two Babylonians:

“Who are all these newcomers?”

“Israelites – from Jerusalem, which Nebuchadnezzar just conquered.”

“Ah. What’s the name of their god?”

“Yahweh – or something like that.”

“Huh. He’s not much of a god is he? – not like Marduk!”

Yahweh’s name may not be treated as common –
to treat Yahweh’s name as common is to profane it!

“But I had concern for my holy name...”

Concern might be too weak a word here.

This word appears 8 times in Ezekiel.

Elsewhere it translated “pity”

In 5:11 God says that because Israel has defiled his sanctuary,

“I will cut you down...I will have no pity.”

Likewise in 7:4, 7:9, 8:18, 9:5 and 9:10 –

as God is describing Israel’s abominations,

he says “I will have no pity” but will destroy you.

God is saying “I took pity on my holy name.”

I want this to sink in for a bit:

God did not save Israel because he took pity on them.

He saved Israel because he took pity on himself!

And yes, the implication is valid:

God did not save you because he took pity on you.
He saved you because he had pity on his own holy name!

Do you want to know why the saints of old had a backbone?
Do you want to know why they had such courage in the face of all comers?
It was because they understood – salvation isn't about me!
Salvation is about God.
Jesus taught us this when he taught us to pray,
“Our Father in heaven, *hallowed be thy name*”
May your name be holy.
And may your name be treated as holy.
If we understood the holiness of God's name –
if we acted like we believed that God's name was holy –
that the holiness of God's name matters more than anything else –

what sort of people would we be?

And this begins to point you to the solution.
I will vindicate the holiness of my great name –
and I will do this by
restoring my people from exile
restoring my land to become like the Garden of Eden
and causing my people to increase and multiply.

2. The Solution: God's Name Must Be Vindicated (v22-32)

a. I Will Vindicate the Holiness of My Name (v22-23)

²²"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.

All throughout Ezekiel we have seen over and over again
how he draws on images and themes from Leviticus 26.
Leviticus 26 was the passage where God had warned against idolatry and rebellion,
and promised blessing for obedience, and cursing for disobedience.

Here in Ezekiel 36, however,
God directly contradicts Leviticus 26.
In Leviticus 26:45, God had said that he would spurn them forever,
but “for their sake I will remember the covenant with their fathers.”

Here is Ezekiel 36 God says that it is *not* for their sake that he will deliver them.
It is for his own sake – for the sake of the holiness of his great name!

It seems as though Ezekiel is addressing a misunderstanding in Israel.
They seem to have thought (based on passages like Leviticus 26)
that God's love for them had something to do with *them*.

This may sound strange, but for Ezekiel, salvation is *not* rooted in God's *love*,
but in his holiness!

It is not as though God *loved* Israel and so saved them from their enemies.
Ezekiel has made it clear that there is *nothing* in Israel that God loves.
Israel has deserved God's wrath and curse.
If God judges them according to their deeds,
then he would destroy them like he destroyed Sodom.

But there is one – *and only one* – reason why he won't.
Because of the holiness of his own great name.

God's reputation is on the line!
He has revealed himself to be faithful to his promises.
Hesed and emet – steadfast love and faithfulness – characterizes him.

Therefore, God will deliver Israel for his own sake – not for theirs!

And you know what?
This is good news!
If God's love depended on anything in *you* –
then your future would be very precarious!

Christopher Wright points out
“only that which brings honour and glory to God himself
can be good news for anybody else” (287-288)

Verses 24-32 then focus on how God will restore his people:

b. I Will Restore My People (v24-32)

i. I Will Cleanse You from Idolatry (v24-25)

²⁴ *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.*

In Deuteronomy 30 God had promised a new Exodus –
that God would take his people from the nations where they were scattered
and gather them and bring them to the land.

The same verbs in Ezekiel 36:24 are found in Dt 30:4.

Ezekiel starts with the outward cleansing.

Remember that Ezekiel has compared Israel to a menstruating woman!

How do you cleanse a menstruating woman?
Leviticus 15 said that you start with washing with water.

The restoration of Israel from exile will begin with a cleansing –
with the rites of purification.

When Jesus came, John prepared the way for him
announcing his coming through a baptism of repentance.
John the Baptist came to begin the restoration of Israel from exile.
When John came baptizing, no one asked “what are you doing?”
The reason was because Ezekiel had made clear that the sprinkling of water
was the sign of the restoration from exile!

And God says that when he sprinkles them with clean water,
you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

This is part of the reason why the early church
asked people to renounce the devil and all his works in baptism.
They understood that baptism is a cleansing from idolatry.
It is a decisive break with the old way of life.

And the washing of water in baptism has continued to be the outward sign of cleansing.
Think of Paul’s statement that some Christians in Corinth had once been idolaters,
prostitutes, adulterers, thieves, drunkards and swindlers!
“But you were *washed*, you were sanctified, you were justified
in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by the Spirit of our God.”

God takes unclean people – the scum of the earth –
and cleanses us, washes us, and makes us clean.

Think of our reading from Hebrews 10, where we were encouraged to
“draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith,
having our hearts sprinkled clean from a guilty conscience,
and having our bodies washed with pure water.”
This is the language of priestly consecration –
but it is also the language of the cleansing of the unclean!

Baptism, for Hebrews, is connected with the cleansing of the unclean,
as well as the consecration of the priests.

And this outward sign is connected with a new inward reality:

ii. I Will Give You a New Heart and Spirit to Obey (v26-28)

²⁶And 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. ²⁷And I will put my Spirit within you,

and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. ²⁸ You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

This is essential – because if God merely restores them to the land,
they are likely to do the same thing all over again!

The promise that God would remove their heart of stone and give them hearts of flesh
is a quotation from Ezekiel 11:19.

Ezekiel 11 was where the glory of the LORD departed from the temple.
This was the moment when God declared that the abominations of Israel
had driven him from the land.
And God had said as he was leaving the temple
that one day he would restore his people
and give them a new heart and a new spirit.

Ezekiel was reflecting on Deuteronomy 29:4, where Moses told Israel that
“to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand
or eyes to see or ears to hear.”

Moses went on to warn Israel of the coming exile
that the whole land would be “burned out with brimstone and salt,
nothing sown and nothing growing, where no plant can sprout,
an overthrow like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim,
which the Lord overthrew in his anger and wrath.” (v23)

And Moses had said in the next chapter, Deuteronomy 30:6,
that when Israel was restored from exile:
“the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring,
so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul,
that you may live.”

A heart of stone is hard and unyielding.
A heart of stone is cold and unresponsive.
In a word, a heart of stone is dead.

But a heart of flesh is soft and malleable.
A heart of flesh is warm and responsive.
In a word, a heart of flesh is alive!

In short, Ezekiel is saying that God will bring Israel back from the dead!

Ever since the fall, humanity has demonstrated quite convincingly
that we cannot save ourselves.

Only God can save.
And when he raised up Jesus from the dead and seated him in glory,
he gave to Jesus the promised Holy Spirit,

whom he poured out on his church on the day of Pentecost
so that we might have hearts of flesh!

God will take the unclean exile and wash her – and cleanse her from her impurity –
and give her a new heart and a new spirit.

(This is the imagery behind Ephesians 5 –
the picture of Christ washing, cleansing his bride)

The outward washing is a picture of the inward renewal.
And that inward renewal includes a new identity (a new heart and spirit)
even to the point that God will put his own Spirit in them!
And God will do this so that they might walk in his statutes.
This new identity results in new obedience.

And the language of verse 27 is quite explicit:
“I will *cause you* to walk in my statutes.”
The point is that as long as obedience depends upon us,
we are doomed!
It is only when God himself puts his Spirit in us
to cause us to walk in his ways,
that we will actually do it!

And that is precisely what God has done in giving us his Spirit.

Think of Philippians 2 – “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,
for it is God who is at work in you both to will and to do for his good pleasure.”

We’ll stop for today with verse 28:

You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

God will be faithful to his promise to Abraham.
He will do what he said he would do.

The chosen people will dwell in the promised land –
and everything will be right once more,
as God himself will be our God.