

Together We...Live Transformed *Saved People Live Differently*

Ezekiel 36:24-28

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on November 26th, 2023.

The Tyranny of Leftovers

If you were like us at our home, you have been slowly working through leftovers from Thanksgiving. Despite one glorious reprieve of corned-beef hash and eggs on Friday, we have been dutifully powering through Thanksgiving leftovers. So far, we've utilized various methods through which to consume leftovers. Sandwiches. Various gravies. Different combinations so as not to be worn down with the same exact plate over and over and over again. We've done a fair job. All casserole dishes have now been consolidated into Tupperware – a true sense of accomplishment after ten pounds of mashed potatoes finally were moved from the pot into the turkey container. We have been eating leftovers since Thursday. And we will be for another week, as I put away seven different lunch-sized portions of them for my wife and I to eat next week.

And if you are like us, you feel a sense of obligation to finish off at least 90% of what was left over. We refuse to do anything new in food stuffs until the leftovers have been removed, done away with and are gone. Because, quite frankly, we do not have ROOM for anything new.

Until what was there already is done away with, there isn't room for anything new. That is not just true with our attitude about turkey-day leftovers. It is also the truth about salvation and transformation. Transformation cannot happen until you are made brand new. And brand new you doesn't happen until the old you, whatever is left over of what existed before, is done away with.

As we conclude our six weeks of sermons about the vision statements and core values that will guide us into becoming the church God is leading us to become, we finish up this morning with together we are transformed because saved people live differently. I invite you to Ezekiel 36:24-28 as we read about how God gets rid of the leftovers and brings forward new creations.

The Meta-Narrative of Israel's Exile in Babylon

Ezekiel is a prophet of Israel during their exile in Babylon.

During the course of his prophetic ministry during the Babylonian captivity, God had brought forth some unique truth through extraordinary illustrations. Ezekiel did not have it easy. But at this point, God has promised to give Israel a new shepherd-leader and a renewed land. This was a powerful promise.

A Shepherd-leader would eventually live in the Promised Land. However, the people had proven themselves unfit, unworthy to live in the land. This means that if the people of God were going to regather and return, a total transformation was required. Only complete transformation from the inside out would make this new life possible and then successful.

This is what Ezekiel turns his attention to in this part of chapter 36. When God's people had lived in their own land, they had polluted it by their actions. As a result, they were not allowed to remain in God's presence, and he would not remain in their midst. A holy God cannot abide the presence of sin. Ezekiel reminds the people that they were unclean. Sin had defiled them. Ezekiel describes their sin as disqualifying the people from being able to even take part in religious activities of any sort. Sin rendered them unfit to be in contact with the One who brings life.

Ezekiel reminds them also that to even talk to the living God through the various Old Testament means of grace was impossible as long as one was in a state of impurity. It is not far from what James writes about in the New Testament when he says that sin brings death into the life of a believer. The sin of the people had been in contact with death and therefore the people simply could not, in their current state, even speak to God.

Israel, through their idolatry and bloodshed, turned their land into a place of death. God had told them in Deuteronomy 29 that if they did that, He would scatter them among the nations. Which he did. However, these nations nearby saw how the people and God's covenant relationship was broken. Their conclusion was that God was not sufficiently powerful since his people were in exile. So, in effect, as long as Israel was scattered in exile, they were profaning the name of God. Simply by being in exile instead of in the promised land, the Israelites treated God's name with disrespect and irreverence.

This is why Ezekiel preaches about God's future mercy. God is concerned about his name.

And his name is inextricably linked to Israel by entering into a covenant with them. Because of that act, mercy must be shown to Israel. The honor of God's name will be vindicated. God will act in a demonstration of his holiness.

Ezekiel tells the people that God will demonstrate his power both by bringing his people back to the land and, most significantly, by providing a complete transformation, an entire change, to their nature. His people must be redeemed not just outwardly with the land but more importantly inwardly. Israel will be gathered together and returned from the nations in exile to their land.

But then Israel will be sprinkled with clean water, symbolizing Israel's cleansing from all of the past impurities and idolatries. Israel will be purified from all of the things that had once made it unclean.

Ezekiel describes this outward act initiation is then followed by a deeper, internal change, where Israel's heart and spirit will be made new. The "heart" and the "spirit" are the sources of thought and will. All of our actions flow from thought and will, from heart and spirit. God promises to transform the unresponsive, unyielding, un-submitting hearts and replace them with living, warm, responsive flesh. Everything that was defiled, made filthy from sin, will be made clean. The Spirit of God, which brings life and power, will indwell them and create in them both the will and the ability to follow God's decrees and laws. Then, finally, the people will be fit to live in God's land and be his people, and he in turn will not be ashamed to be called their God.

A New Life, Not An Old Life Improved Upon

As we consider this ancient text, written to a group of people living in exile, we recognize that there is a lot more implied here for us than just for the Israelites in exile. God is promising what he will do for the exiles upon their return. And further, we understand that for us, Jesus secures the New Covenant by his blood for all who trust in him. The promise to both the ancients and to us today: The ones who will enter the kingdom are those who have been made brand new spiritually. We become brand new by a cleansing of the old and the creation of the new. This is total transformation.

When we are born again, we are transformed. Physically, we will continue to be the same old person we always had been. You are still you and I am still me. We continue to be the same morally accountable people we have always been. Salvation doesn't change that. There is continuity that exists. This continuity requires forgiveness, cleansing.

It is why 1 John 1:9 is such a potent, promise-packed punch of a verse. Because the old me will still be there in physical form, I have to experience forgiveness and cleansing.

If the old me ceased to be completely, physically and spiritually, forgiveness and redemption is a moot point. You don't need to redeem what no longer exists. Ezekiel reminds us that salvation brings dramatic change in our hearts and spirits. Not our physical self. There are a lot of leftovers from the past that need to be accounted for. So we must be cleansed and forgiven so the Spirit can indwell our lives and change our hearts and our spirits.

The Bible teaches us that our old self was crucified in Romans 6:6, and that we have died with Christ in Colossians 3:3, and we are to consider ourselves as dead in Romans 6:11, and we are to put off the old self in Ephesians 4:22. There is an old nature, an old disposition, an old way of thinking and being and doing that needs to be removed, deleted, done away with.

Forgiveness and cleansing is just the beginning. We need to be made brand new and that means total transformation. We need a new way to view life, a new way of thinking, a new way of being, and a new way of doing things. We need a new set of values and a new perspective on this world.

This is why the promise of a new heart and a new spirit in Ezekiel is such a beautiful thing. That old heart that responded passionately to things that we love like sports or music or Mexican food or holidays or whatever was also stone cold toward spiritual things. It was unfeeling and unresponsive to anything from God. The old stoney heart didn't feel anything about Jesus or the cross or the resurrection or the Holy Spirit or Kingdom of God. We need that to be replaced with a heart that is responsive and sensitive and submissive to Jesus and the Kingdom and the gospel.

Salvation makes that possible. God provided a Shepherd Savior to lead us to new life, to his promised Kingdom.

God gives us a heart that is soft, tender, merciful, compassionate – a heart that reflects and channels His heart.

A New Heart of Flesh

God tells us in Ezekiel that he will put a new heart in us, one that responds to his statutes. This means we will want to, have a desire, to follow his word.

We won't be forced into this life, kicking and screaming, grabbed by our ears and forced into submission. That is what the law was, what the Old Covenant was. That is not what the New Covenant is all about. We enter into this new life willingly. We follow his teaching, his word, because our hearts and spirits want to. It isn't forced over us. It bubbles up from within our new hearts.

The Holy Spirit works to give shape to this transformation. But be careful. There are a lot of all-or-nothing folks out there, and maybe in here, who want to know why they're struggling to be "happy" in the faith. Those all-or-nothing folks cannot comprehend how this new life is supposed to work. They came, they bowed a knee, prayed a prayer, got a new little kiddie Bible, splish splash and the baptistery tub, and goshes and gollies, you betcha they're transformed. Right? Well, no. Wrong.

Salvation can certainly be a moment, an instant of understanding that the Shepherd Savior Jesus can forgive us of our sins and cleanse us of our leftovers, clearing it all out, making way for a whole bunch of brand new. But sanctification is a process. It is long, continual, every day. If you are an all-or-nothing type, sanctification or transformation is a struggle. Because there will be days in which you realize that you are responding to things in new ways. You are transforming in your approach to life and in your approach to God.

And then, there are days when the continuity overwhelms you and you recognize that the old you is right there. Acting. Being. Doing all of the same-old-you-things that you thought were cleared out and done away with. Except there they are. Right there on display.

I Want to Change My Life in Seven Happy Hops

My dad used to hum an old sea shanty, *What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor*.

There were a number of methods considered in dealing with said inebriated mariner. “Drag him in the longboat until he’s sober.” That was one possibility. So was, “Put him in the scuppers and hose him all over.” I’m just not sure that either of those methods would affect life-long, lasting change in the drunken sailor.

The world that we live in provides a lot of other, more serious ways to attempt to bring about change in people’s lives. Self-help programs, twelve-step programs, an endless parade of counseling options. So many hours and dollars are spent on things that do not bring effective, lasting change.

In contrast to all of these methods to bring about change, Ezekiel presents the only effective and lasting way of transformation. People are not sick and are in need of a cure. They are sinful and in need of purification. Our past history with sin has left so many leftovers that there is no room for anything else new. We are totally unfit to live in the Kingdom. We are offensive to a holy God. It isn’t that we are not living life to the full. That isn’t the true promise of salvation. Any church that preaches you are living a half full or mostly full life except you need one more thing is teaching you lying heresy. Our sin means that not only are we NOT living a full life, but we have also forfeited our right to life itself. We must be saved and made brand new, and we must then grow in that understanding.

We cannot, on our own, kick that bad habit of death in our lives. That must be done for us. Yes, God does love you and has a great plan for your new life. But you do not approach God like you are interviewing him for a job in the business of your heart. Checking his references. Wondering if, as a Deity, he is capable of being “Lord of your life,” wondering if Christianity will “work for your busy schedule” or being dead in sin.

God will save your soul but not because you two are a good fit for one another. God will save your soul because God is committed to his eternal sovereign plan to save for himself a people. And you can be a part of His people. His Kingdom.

Together We...

People, Kingdom – these are group terms. Ezekiel wasn’t preaching to a person. He was preaching to a people. Because transformation is a spiritual change from the inside out that occurs when the Holy Spirit takes our stone-dead hearts and spirits and replaces them.

With new hearts and spirits that are sensitive to God and ready to surrender. Together we live transformed lives. In community. As a people. In His Kingdom. Salvation is a personal decision. Transformation happens in community with the Lord and His people.

Together we lived transformed because saved people live differently. God doesn't just shine up the old bits. He doesn't take all the old leftovers and make some great gumbo or casserole or amazing sandwich. He removes all that was left over from the old you and remakes you with a brand-new heart and spirit.

Those two stages that Ezekiel speaks of – sprinkling of water in purification and internal transformation of receiving a new heart and a new spirit – is the gracious work of God that makes a new life possible for you. And me. And anyone who would believe. Come be transformed with us as we continue to become his people, his Church, and experience life in his Kingdom.