

A vision of a new life

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[0 : 00] I'd like us to look together this evening at the passage in the scriptures which we have read, Ezekiel chapter 36, and the passage from verse 25 to the end of the chapter, but especially in verse 27, the first part of that verse, that we might read from verse 26, where God says, a new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you, and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh, and I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. The Lord says through the prophet, and I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes.

The whole of this passage which Ezekiel proclaimed to the people can be summed up under this title, a vision of new life.

And that is something that is worth having. New life. Life that is ever so much better than what we've had before.

Up until this point in his prophecies, Ezekiel has had the heavy task of speaking mainly about doom and destruction.

But now he turns to speak God's word of hope, God's word of salvation, God's word of restoration.

[2 : 09] God was going to come in a mighty saving way to restore his people again, and to bring new life to this dead people.

And in this passage, we have through the prophetic word, and all the elements that abide regarding our new life in Christ Jesus.

And if the picture here, and it surely is this, if it is a picture of fullness of life, of a new heart and a new spirit, of prosperity and peace, then we can be assured of this, that life in Jesus Christ, life through the gospel of Jesus Christ, is a full life.

A life of spiritual blessings, which bring us life in all its fullness, better than we could find it in any other place.

It is life in all its richness, as God meant it to be for us. And when we relate this to the missionary task of the church, we see that we don't need to make any apology for going forth with the gospel.

[3 : 50] I mentioned something of this this morning, that oftentimes Christian missionaries, the Christian church in general, is accused of destroying indigenous cultures, and bringing only Western ideas, which disrupt other cultures.

This is not the truth. It may happen in some cases, and if it does, then people may be guilty of transferring their own ideas rather than the gospel of Christ.

But we have to remember, too, that Christ has transformed our way of life. And he is going on transforming it and bringing his judgment upon it, too.

But one, he'd make no apology for preaching the gospel that changes people, because it always changes and does away with what is bad and changes it to what is best.

Christ never asks us to throw away anything that is worth throwing away. He always throws away the bad in order that we might be filled with all the fullness of God, the richness of his blessing, everything that is good for us.

[5 : 21] Well, then, we have described for us in this passage, first of all, a new relationship with God. The Lord says, then, then, will I sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean from all your filthiness and from all your idols will I cleanse you.

Now, it's this filthiness, this sinfulness, this idolatry in the hearts and in the lives of these people that had separated them from God.

and it's the same with us. There is this dirtiness of sin in our lives and this forms a barrier between us and God.

And the cleansing that the prophet speaks of here is the, in its literal sense, was the ritualistic cleansings which a Jewish worshipper underwent as he came before God to take away his ceremonial defilement.

Ezekiel was a priest as well as a prophet and his book is full of these allusions to his, what would have been his priestly work had he been able to, to minister as one in Jerusalem.

[6 : 45] Well, the cleansing was ritualistic but it was symbolizing the ending of defilement. the taking away of the, the uncleanness that separated a person from God and that made him fit to come into God's presence.

And if we transfer that into New Testament terms, we speak, as Paul speaks in the epistle to the Romans of justification, being justified by faith, we have peace with God.

That is just, we are being put onto a right footing with God. There is a new relationship established between God and men.

Another Bible word meaning roughly the same thing is reconciliation. where the barriers separating us have been removed so that we can speak face to face, so that we can hold hands together, so that we are one.

And it has the element of forgiveness because the sin that was there is now taken away and there is no longer a barrier separating God and men.

[8 : 10] A new relationship. The African people with whom we work have many sacrifices in their heathen worship.

Sometimes a goat will be sacrificed. Oftentimes you drive along the road and you'll see a man or two men leading along a white goat and you know that this goat is going to be sacrificed.

They use a goat because perhaps a goat has a very human-like cry and they will prod the goat with a spear to make sure that it is going to cry out because if it doesn't utter a sound it is no use for the sacrifices.

They believe the spirits will not accept it. Similarly with an ox when it is sacrificed it must bellow out or else they will have to use another animal.

But with all the sacrifices there is never the assurance that what has come between them and the spirits has really and forever been done away.

[9 : 25] there is this lingering doubt that when the next calamity happens it will be because they've done something wrong to anger the ancestors. There is never any peace because there is no real justification.

There is no real reconciliation. They know nothing of what Christ has done for us in the gospel. and that is why we go forth to speak about this new relationship.

God says he'll take the old dirty defilement away and bring us into a new relationship with himself. I wonder if you've experienced that new relationship with the Lord in your life.

It's not just for Heathen in Africa but for us, for each person. For unless we have entered into that new relationship with the Lord, then we are still under his judgment.

And the prophet tells us here also about a new affection in the heart. He says, a new heart also will I give you and a new spirit will I put within you.

[10 : 44] And I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh. That will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and ye shall keep my judgments and do them.

The barriers between God and men need to be taken away. But more than that, our hearts need to be changed.

It would be no use putting us on a new footing before God if our hearts, if our affections towards God were not changed.

If our ways were not changed and if in our hearts we were not really seeking the Lord. But God says, I will put a new heart.

That is referring to our emotions, to our mind, to our will. He'll give us a new will that will desire to do what is pleasing to him.

[11 : 46] And he says, I'll put a new spirit within you. That is referring to the motivating force within us, to the thoughts, to the conduct that we have day by day.

And God says, that new spirit will be my spirit. It's not in man to do these things of himself, but the Lord gives us the decide.

I'll put my spirit within you and so we will delight to do the will of God in the inward man. And it will show in our outward living.

he'll take away the old stony, worldly, unbelieving heart. You can't get much growth out of a stone. You can't get much spiritual response out of someone who is dead.

But God takes that away. And he gives us a responsive heart and will. So the Christian life is not a drudge.

[12 : 52] It is life with a capital L and in all its fullness. It is life that is gladly doing the will of God.

The psalmist said, I love the Lord. Paul said that he loved the Lord and that he lived in the light of this love.

And that it was an ongoing thing. The Lord continued to love him. There's emotion in it. There is will in it. There is freedom to serve the Lord.

I remember some years ago a young man in one of the congregations in our South African church got up out of his seat and went and asked the minister who was preaching that day if the words in his Bible were written in big letters when it came to John chapter 3 and verse 16 for God so loved the world.

Because as he was looking at his Bible these words stood out large and he wanted to see if it was the same in the minister's Bible. His heart was so thrilled by the fact of God's great love for the world and not just for the world but for him in particular.

[14 : 18] And that's the kind of spirit the Lord puts within us. It's something that just leaps out in joy and gladness in affection toward him.

And if you have had the barrier of sin taken away then this is the new affection that you will have in your heart. It will drive out the old things and bring in what is gloriously new.

And there are new enjoyments from the Lord and that is the third thing we see here. New enjoyments. The prophet says you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers and ye shall be my people and I will be your God.

And so he goes on to tell them what was going to happen when that came about in their experience. The land was going to be fruitful, no more famine.

there was going to be no more drought. We've lived through a drought in our part of southern Africa.

[15 : 23] And it's a sad thing to experience, to see the land just absolutely parched. Where the people have planted their maize crops, it may have sprung up a little and then wasted away to nothing.

The water holes are empty, the animals get thinner and thinner and thinner. The sun beats down from leaden skies and there is no water.

It's a sad thing to live through and it's the kind of picture the Lord often uses to describe a life that is without himself.

but when he comes into a life, he transforms it. The rain comes and the crops grow and there is fruitfulness.

There is all the fruit of the Spirit that is described for us in the New Testament scriptures. There is all the riches of Christ. There is, to change the metaphor for the Christian, there is the whole armor of God with which he can equip himself to live out his Christian life in the world.

[16 : 42] And Paul says that for the mind, there is the fullness of all those holy and uplifting, elevating things that we should think upon.

Things that are holy and just and good and beautiful and so on. And Paul says that in Christ all things are yours and hear Christ's and Christ is God's.

There is a rounded fullness in the gospel as the prophet explains to us here. I'll multiply the fruit of the tree, he says, a picture of blessing manifold.

So often as Christians we live sub-Christian lives because we don't appropriate to ourselves all the fruits of the gospel.

The Lord has given us everything, everything for victorious Christian living. And that is ours.

[17 : 50] As we mentioned this morning when Jesus breathed upon his disciples, he said to them, receive ye or take to yourselves the Holy Spirit and with him we have the fullness of the Lord's blessings.

So there is new enjoyment in the Lord. And then when all these things come, there is a rather steadying thing said to us here in verses 31 and 32 what we might call new appraisals of our old life.

For the prophet says then, that is, when they were receiving all these blessings, the blessings of salvation, then shall ye remember your own evil ways and your doings that were not good, and shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and for your abominations.

It's a strange thing perhaps that this should come in a passage that is dealing with the fullness of the spiritual life. And yet, it reminds us that Jesus said blessed are the poor in spirit.

People who do not forget the path by which they have come. People who do not forget that salvation is all of grace, and that no one is a Christian who has not been born again by the Spirit of God, who has been redeemed by the saving work of Jesus Christ.

[19 : 42] And without that, he would have no hope, he wouldn't know the Lord's cleansing, he would still be in the far country in his sin.

You see, we're so prone to pride, and spiritual pride is the worst kind of all. And we're constantly in this danger of thinking that we've done it all, that we're better than other people.

people. This is one thing that in our missionary situation, we have to be aware of, first of all, as preachers, that we never give the impression that simply because we are missionaries from another culture, that we are automatically better than the people to whom we have gone.

Or that the people there think that everyone in this country from which we have come must be a Christian. I'm sure it would surprise many of our African people if they came to our churches, with so many of them empty, and with our nation thoroughly pagan, as it often appears to be.

But it's a danger that our African brethren are prone to us well, that once they become Christian people, that they tend to look down upon those who are not.

[21 : 18] And it's a danger especially among the office bearers in the church. And some weeks ago we had a conference of people who were involved in the missionary work in our area, church and one old and very experienced man was speaking about the leadership in the African churches.

And he used as the theme for his address the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians. Jesus, let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.

And the point he was making was just this, that we so often think that when a man is made a deacon or an elder, he's been promoted, as it were, in the church.

Whereas, in effect, the way up in Christian service is the way down. Jesus, the Lord of glory, humbled himself and became a servant.

And if we are to succeed in our mission, whoever we may be, the white missionary, the black minister, the black office bearer, the black Christian, then one has to be humble.

[22 : 37] Because in an African society, the person who is an elder, a man who is a chief, he is up and the others are down.

He doesn't expect to go and serve them, he expects them to come to serve him. We sometimes complain about the African ministers not pastoring the people as they ought to do, but they are true to their role in an African society.

That they are put into a position of leadership, therefore, other people should come to them.

Whereas in Christian service, the way up is the way down, to humble oneself to become a servant. We've got to constantly keep our old life in review. It will humble us to remember that we are only what we are because Christ has done what was needful to save us from our sin.

It is all of grace, not of works, lest any man should boast. But when all this comes to us, the Lord reminds us in this passage, too, that there are new opportunities for service, new opportunities or new activities in the Lord's service.

[24 : 09] we read in verse 33, thus saith the Lord God, in the day that I shall have cleansed you from all your iniquities, I will also cause you to dwell in the cities and the wastes shall be builded.

Who was to build them? They had to build them. The desolate land shall be tilled. They had to do the farming and so on. We are not saved to be lazy Christians.

We are not people who should be doing nothing, but the Christian of all people should be an active person. If you look at the world through Christian eyes, you shouldn't be asking, well, what can I do?

It's all there before you. Perhaps you should be asking, what can I do? Not because you can't see what to do, but just because you can see there's so much to be done.

And so there is. It takes time. It takes effort. It's a hard thing to start working in the Lord's service.

[25 : 25] But it's something that we should all be engaged in. You remember when Zacchaeus was converted at once? He started making good things that he had done wrong before and giving to the

Lord's work.

When Matthew was converted, he immediately went out and started working for the Lord. One of the first things that Paul said as a Christian man was, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?

And what a glorious task it is to start working for the Lord. What can you do? You can pray. And that's not a little thing.

We know the blessing in our own personal lives because people have prayed for us. And I counted a privilege to be a part of people's prayers because we know very well ourselves that we couldn't do anything if the Lord was not answering prayer and seeking to do something through us.

And I would take this opportunity of thanking those of you who do pray for us and for the work that we represent and praying for our brethren, both white and black, in the missionary work in South Africa.

[26 : 55] You can help other people. You can speak a word for Christ. You can live as a Christian ought to live. There are boundless things that you can do and it's not an option.

It is something that is laid upon every one of us so that the waste places will be built up and that God's kingdom may come.

How can we do it? Well, the Lord tells us how in this passage. He says, thus saith the Lord God, I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel to do it for them.

The Lord gives the power and this is the next thing. We see new power from the Lord himself. God doesn't give us work to do without the tools, without the power, without the abilities.

grace. And so you can pray for the Lord's help and blessing and it will come from him, enabling power, persevering grace for every day that we live.

[28 : 07] And what is the end of it all? The end of it all is this. It's contained in the last line of this passage, and they shall know that I am the Lord.

it will bring new glory to the Lord's name. New glory because people will see that he is a saving God, full of mercy in all his works.

That people will see the power of the Lord's salvation and the effect on a person's life. That people will bring, that it will bring glory to the Lord because people will see the Lord's presence among his people.

And others will know that he is with them. In a moment, we will sing together Psalm 126, and that's the testimony of that Psalm, that people would hear the Lord's people praising the Lord.

Lord, they would know that the Lord was among them as he was bringing them back from their captivity. A vision of new life.

[29 : 26] Have you got it for yourself, this new life? And if you have, do you want it for others too? it's the only message in the world that is worth proclaiming, because it saves people and it changes people.

It makes them better people. will you then pray that the Lord will go on changing the lives of men and women, here and wherever the gospel is proclaimed.

Will you go on praying that the Lord will send forth people to take the gospel to where it is not being proclaimed at present, that his name will be glorified and precious souls won to him.

Amen. Shall we pray? Dear Lord, we do ask thee to be with us now and to fill our hearts with faith in Jesus as our Savior, that we may have that new life within us and send us forth with thine own power to go into the world, to seek souls souls to be brought to Christ and that it all may bring glory unto thy great and glorious name.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.