



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for March 1, 2009
Released on Wednesday, February 25, 2009**

"A New Heart"

DEVOTIONAL READING: 2 Corinthians 3:1–11.

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 11:14–21.

LESSON TEXT: Ezekiel 11:14–21.

Ezekiel 11:14–21

14 Again the word of the LORD came unto me, saying,

15 Son of man, thy brethren, even thy brethren, the men of thy kindred, and all the house of Israel wholly, are they unto whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, Get you far from the LORD: unto us is this land given in possession.

16 Therefore say, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Although I have cast them far off among the heathen, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come.

17 Therefore say, Thus saith the Lord GOD; I will even gather you from the people, and assemble you out of the countries where ye have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.

18 And they shall come thither, and they shall take away all the detestable things thereof and all the abominations thereof from thence.

19 And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh:

20 That they may walk in my statutes, and keep mine ordinances, and do them: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

21 But as for them whose heart walketh after the heart of their detestable things and their abominations, I will recompense their way upon their own heads, saith the Lord GOD.

LESSON AIMS:

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

- 1.** Summarize Ezekiel's message to the exiles in Babylon and the remnant left in Jerusalem.
- 2.** Explain the concept of the "hard heart" as Ezekiel uses it.
- 3.** Describe one area of spiritual hardness in his or her life and suggest one way to correct it.

INTRODUCTION:

Hard Hearts, Hard People

We hear a lot about *heart health* these days. Medical people have long known that the human heart is a tireless workhorse, pumping the blood that nourishes and cleanses every cell in our bodies. A heart may beat 100,000 times a day or more,

and it does this without any conscious effort on our part. If the beating becomes irregular or weak, it is a sign of grave problems. Damage to the heart can lead to disability or death. Thus, heart disease is serious business, and taking care of one's heart is (or should be) a major concern.

Heart specialists have identified a rare medical condition that they call *restrictive cardiomyopathy*. This condition occurs when the walls of the heart stiffen, resulting in a heart that is unable to do its pumping job effectively. A person with this condition will have poor circulation and an overworked heart. This person often will be tired all the time and not be able to tolerate even minor physical activity. In the modern medical world, such a person may become a candidate for a heart transplant.

Restrictive cardiomyopathy is a rare condition. But a hardened spiritual heart is not rare. It is an ancient problem, documented thoroughly in the Bible. The spiritually hard heart is a tragic part of the Bible's storyline. The hard heart has aligned itself against God.

The Bible uses other figures of speech to describe this condition. The ancient Jewish people were accused of being "uncircumcised in the heart" (see Jeremiah 9:26; compare Acts 7:51). The people had ears that were "uncircumcised" (Jeremiah 6:10). They were often chastised for being "stiffnecked" (see 2 Chronicles 30:8).

We can observe that times have not changed that much. All too many people stumble through life with hard hearts, as hard people. They are seemingly impenetrable, neither giving nor receiving overtures of God's love and grace.

As the condition of restrictive cardiomyopathy may call for a physical heart transplant, so the condition of the spiritually hard heart calls for a big change. This change implants a will that is softened to God's purposes. This understanding of the spiritual heart transplant stands at the core of today's lesson from the book of Ezekiel.

The Prophet Ezekiel ministered at a low point in Israel's history. He was among the captives deported to Babylon in 597 B.C. with the Judean king Jehoiachin (Ezek. 1:1-3). God required Ezekiel to endure many unpleasant experiences to convey an unpleasant message of judgment. But intermingled with this message were glimpses of future blessing that stood out like rays of light penetrating the darkness.

One such glimpse is found in this week's lesson. In the midst of a vision showing the utter destruction of Jerusalem, God reassured the discouraged prophet that He would both care for the exiles and eventually restore a remnant to spiritual usefulness. Israel would again inhabit their land and glorify the Lord there.

GOD'S PRESENT CARE FOR THE EXILES—Ezekiel 11:14-16

1. What prompted Ezekiel to ask whether God intended to destroy all of Israel?

Ezekiel had been transported in spirit to the east gate of the temple in Jerusalem, where he saw twenty-five men who had led the Jews in the city to believe they would be safe there (vs. 1-3). Yet the Lord revealed that their hopes were futile. The city would surely fall, and its leaders would be pursued to the nation's borders and judged there (vs. 4-12). Even as Ezekiel voiced this prophecy, one of the men fell dead. This prompted the prophet to ask God whether He intended to annihilate all of Israel (v. 13).

The Lord reassured Ezekiel that this was not the case. He did so by first dispelling an error that had been circulated by the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Those still left in the city had arrogantly claimed that only they remained as the Lord's people and had title to the land. They also said that those who had been exiled

from the land, had been cut off from the Lord, His land, and His blessings. The Jerusalemites considered themselves the only true Israelites left.

But this was far from the truth. Ezekiel feared that the deaths of those left in Jerusalem would mean the death of the nation (Ezek. 11:13).

2. What role did God give Ezekiel in relation to his exiled brethren (Ezek. 11:14,15a)?

Now the Lord advised Ezekiel to stop being concerned with Jerusalem and to focus instead on "thy brethren, even thy brethren, the men of thy kindred, and all the house of Israel wholly" (v. 15). The repetition of "thy brethren" gives additional emphasis to the fact that the exiles among whom he was living in a land of captivity were his true brethren.

3. What did the inhabitants remaining in Jerusalem think of those who were in exile (v.15b)?

"Get you far from the Lord" was spoken by the Jews from Jerusalem as taunt to those already in exile. We are here because the Lord is with us, but you in exile are far from Him.

Rather than pray or work for the return of the exiles, their arrogance causes them to wish their countrymen "good riddance." Now they can seize the exiles' lands and possessions. Such ghoulish behavior is shocking to Ezekiel and his fellow exiles.

4. Why had God scattered many Jews among the heathen (v. 16a)?

Ezekiel was now to proclaim a divine promise to the exiles. "Thus saith the Lord."

The people of Jerusalem had made their pronouncement; now the Lord would make His. The Lord first acknowledged that He had brought judgment upon His people. He had flung them far away among the heathen peoples and scattered them among the nations. This had happened because Israel had not heeded the warnings given by God through Moses (cf. Deut. 28:63-67) and the multitude of prophets who followed him. They were suffering the just punishment for their sins. But this did not mean God had abandoned them.

5. How did the Lord encourage the dispersed Jews (v. 16b)?

God now promised that He would "be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come" (Ezek. 11:16). The word for "sanctuary" is the same as that used of the temple. Having been removed from Jerusalem, they were prevented from worshiping at the temple. But the Lord promised that He would be their temple wherever they were.

Thus, this promise of sanctuary has a dual significance for the exiles. First, it symbolizes the fact that God is still present among them, even though they are hundreds of miles from Jerusalem. God will still meet them, even though they no longer have access to the temple. Second, we should remember that a sanctuary is a holy place. This means that the exiles can still be holy—a holy people to God. God's holiness is not confined to Jerusalem, but can be found wherever they may go.

Before we move on, we should pause to note that *little* should not be taken to mean "small" or "miniature." Rather, the idea is that of being sanctuary for "a little while."

GOD'S FUTURE CLEANSING OF THE NATION—Ezekiel 11:17-21

Ezekiel next pictures God's great promise of restoration. But God is not interested in just getting the residents of Jerusalem home. He wants change. They must return with new hearts.

6. What did God say to the people (v. 17)?

"Therefore say, Thus saith the Lord God" is repeated (cf. v. 16), as the Lord was about to make another important pronouncement. If it was good news for the exiles to know the Lord was with them during their dispersion, it was even better news that He would regather them to their homeland. "Gather" and "assemble" (v. 17).

The promise of God to give the land of Canaan to Israel originated with Abraham, over 1,400 years earlier (Genesis 12:7). The exile to Babylon in effect takes the land away.

The promise before us has two parts. First, God promises to *gather* His people. He will not lose track of them. At the appropriate time, the Lord will *assemble* those who have been *scattered*. Second, God will *give* back to them *the land of Israel*. The land certainly is not being given permanently to the Babylonians. God had given it to Abraham and his descendants, and that promise is still at work in the midst of exile.

7. Were these Jews fully cleansed when they returned (v. 18)? Explain.

God foretold that when the Israelites came back to their land, they would "take away all the detestable things thereof and all the abominations thereof from thence." This was at least partially fulfilled when they returned from Babylon, for the Jews never again gave themselves to the grosser forms of idolatry. They had participated in idolatry at its worst and been punished for it. Now most wanted to avoid it at all costs.

Sadly, this did not mean they followed their God wholeheartedly. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, along with the prophecies of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, reveal how prone the Jews were to falling into the ways of their heathen neighbors. The New Testament also discloses their spiritual blindness—a blindness that did not let them recognize their Messiah when He came. So it is again evident that Ezekiel's prophecy still looks for a future fulfillment.

8. What did God promise to do for repentant Jews (vs. 19, 20)?

The Lord promises not only to take away the detestable things (idols) that offend Him (Ezek. 11:18) but also to change His people from the inside (vs. 19). He will give them "one heart." The heart in the Old Testament refers to the inner person—the seat of both mind and will. God promised to give all His people single-heartedness in seeking Him; none of their loyalty will be given to idols. They will be unified by unreserved devotion to the Lord.

He will also put a new spirit within them. The meaning here is close to the previous mention of the heart. In so doing, God promises to remove their *stony heart*. This is the heart that has been hardened against Him—stubborn and totally insensitive to divine impressions. The heart of flesh that replaces it is receptive, pliable, and responsive. Only by these divine transformations will Israel be inclined and able to obey the Lord.

This is the spiritual renewal Jesus was referring to when He told Nicodemus he needed to be born again to see and enter the kingdom of God (John 3:1-7). Through Jesus' death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, this transformed life is available to all who receive it by faith. But many from Israel still have hardened hearts (Rom. 11:25). Only in the future messianic age will spiritual transformation on a national scale take place (cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Rom. 11:26-27).

Because of their transformed heart and new spirit, Israel will obey God's statutes and ordinances (Ezek. 11:20). Ancient Israel always seemed to fall short of keeping God's commandments. Only a generation—or two at most—consistently obeyed them before serious decline set in. But renewed

personalities energized by the Holy Spirit will consistently produce good fruits—not because they are prescribed but because they are natural. Israel will keep the law without consciously striving to. It will be God's grace that works this in them.

With such a nation, God will be pleased to accept them as His people and give Himself to them as their God. The covenant relationship He always desired with Israel will finally be realized without hindrance during the reign of the Messiah.

The same relationship with God can exist in this age for all—Jew and Gentile alike—who become new creations by faith in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). A new heart, energized by the Holy Spirit, enables us to keep all of God's righteous standards and delight in doing so.

9. What are some identifying characteristics of a stony heart? How can we tell whether we have a heart of stone in our own souls? How do we go about correcting this problem?

Jesus' teaching on the mote and the beam (Matthew 7:1–5) cautions us that we may see the signs of stony hearts in other lives before we acknowledge them in ourselves. Knowing God's Word without obeying it, being aware of people's needs without feeling compassion, and putting selfish desires ahead of God's priorities are among the indicators that a spiritual heart transplant is needed.

10. What was the fate of unrepentant Jews (v. 21)?

Not all, however, decide to accept the new heart by faith. To say that their "heart walketh after the heart of their detestable things and their abominations" implies that they remain fully attached to their idols and the accompanying worship practices. So seductive is this false worship that they cannot appreciate the advantages of a life transformed by God's grace.

For these, nothing is left but judgment and punishment: "I will recompense their way upon their own heads" (Ezek. 11:21).

Ezekiel later expresses God's actions against such rebellious people this way: "According to thy ways, and according to thy doings, shall they judge thee, saith the Lord God" (Ezekiel 24:14). These are chilling words. No one can stand up against the absolute judgment of a holy God. Our only hope lies in accepting God's offer of a new heart. To those who refuse to forsake their idols and receive the new heart He offers, He has nothing to mete out but judgment.

CONCLUSION

Hard or Soft?

It is considered a negative thing to be called *soft* in many situations. If we "play soft" in athletics, it means we are pushovers or we aren't trying hard enough. If a person is called "soft in the head," he or she is thought to be mentally unstable.

By contrast, we often value things that are *hard*, don't we? Perhaps we admire someone who courageously "takes a hard line" on some matter. We equate hardness with strength. Yet in matters of the spirit, God desires that we have soft hearts. He seeks those who have submissive spirits that will yield to His will. He cannot use the person who defies Him. To resist God's will is an act of rebellion that adds "sin to sin" (Isaiah 30:1).

In the case of Judah, God was unwilling to let the nation's rebellion continue. Instead, God chose to "break" His people by allowing the Babylonians to humiliate and enslave them. He did not do this because of His respect for the Babylonians

(also called *Chaldeans*), for they are described as a “bitter and hasty nation” (Habakkuk 1:6). Rather, He used the Babylonian nation as a tool in His larger plan.

Many Christians are able to recount a long battle against the will of God before their conversion. God had to “break” them for His service. They had to come to the point that they could pray, “Not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42). Only broken people can be God’s holy servants. Are you still fighting God? Is your heart soft or hard toward His will?

PRACTICAL POINTS

- 1.** Beware of judging the spirituality of others only by their outward circumstances (Ezek. 11:14-15).
- 2.** Remember that although God always disciplines His true children, He never forsakes them (Ezek. 11:16; cf. Prov. 3:12; Matt. 28:20).
- 3.** God always keeps His promises, but in His time (Ezek. 11:17-18).
- 4.** A new life demands a new heart, which only God can give (v. 19).
- 5.** The evidence of a new heart is a changed life that seeks to please God by obeying His Word (v. 20).
- 6.** Be warned —those who reject God and His ways will not escape His coming judgment (Ezek. 11:21; John 3:18).

PRAYER

Merciful Father, may You forgive our constant resistance to Your will. We pray that You give us new hearts again, hearts that are in harmony with Your desires and directions. May You continue to change us, transforming us into the likeness of Your Son, in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Hard heart or soft heart—it’s your choice.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK’S LESSON

In our lesson next week we see how God gives His people godly leaders who will care for them. Study Ezekiel 34:23-31 “**New Leadership**” in preparation.

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