



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for March 15, 2009
Released on Wednesday, March 11, 2009**

"A New Spirit Within"

Devotional Reading: Psalm 25:11–22.

Background Scripture: Ezekiel 36:22–32.

Lesson Text: Ezekiel 36:22–32.

Ezekiel 36:22–32

22 Therefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God; I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name's sake, which ye have profaned among the heathen, whither ye went.

23 And I will sanctify my great name, which was profaned among the heathen, which ye have profaned in the midst of them; and the heathen shall know that I am the Lord, saith the Lord God, when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes.

24 For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land.

25 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.

26 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.

27 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.

28 And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God.

29 I will also save you from all your uncleannesses: and I will call for the corn, and will increase it, and lay no famine upon you.

30 And I will multiply the fruit of the tree, and the increase of the field, that ye shall receive no more reproach of famine among the heathen.

31 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.

32 Not for your sakes do I this, saith the Lord God, be it known unto you: be ashamed and confounded for your own ways, O house of Israel.

LESSON AIMS

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

- 1.** Tell what God promised to do for Israel, not for their sake, but for the sake of His own holy name.
- 2.** Explain how a Christian's behavior can honor or profane God's name before other people.
- 3.** Determine to honor God's name in one specific way.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most difficult spiritual truths for us to accept is our depravity—that is, that we are in ourselves utterly unable to please God. We intellectually accept statements like "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing" (Rom. 7:18), but in practice we want to think we have some merits worthy of God's recognition.

God evaluates us by a *perfect* standard and none of us comes close to meeting it. That is why everything He does for us is on the basis of grace. We are not only saved by grace but also kept and em-powered to live a godly life by grace.

When God does something good for us, it is not because we deserve it but because He wants to glorify His holy name. That is the overriding thought in this week's lesson. The blessings promised to Israel will be granted by His grace to sanctify His name on the earth, and they will be enjoyed only through His indwelling Spirit.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Ezekiel taught that God is very protective of His holy name (Ezekiel 39:25). We may wonder why a name is so important to God. In the biblical world, a person's name was synonymous with that person's reputation. The Bible speaks of glorifying God's name (Psalm 86:9), singing to God's name (Psalm 68:4), praising the name of God (Psalm 99:3), etc. All of these are ways of recognizing the good reputation of God's name and drawing on its power for our lives. We can see the power of the name in the remarkable reference to the Lord's name as "a strong tower," a refuge for the righteous (Proverbs 18:10).

It is for these reasons that the name of the Lord is to be guarded as holy. It is not to be profaned (Leviticus 22:32) or to be used in vain (Exodus 20:7). These values are (or should be) still important to the people of God. We should treat the name of our God with enormous respect, for this is a sign of our true relationship to Him. Likewise, we should not engage in behaviors that reflect poorly on our God, behaviors that sully His holy name. Hearing people flippantly say "Oh, my God!" should cause us to cringe.

THE LORD'S HOLY NAME — Ezekiel 36:22-23

1. Why did God's reputation demand both Israel's expulsion from their land and restoration to it (Ezekiel 36:22-23)?

In the discourse of which our lesson is a part, the Lord reviewed the reason He had expelled Israel from their land. *Israel* is known as the people of its God, the Lord. Yet the behavior of the nation has reflected poorly on her God. The people have created a society that tolerates the random shedding of blood; they also accept the worship of foreign gods and idols (Ezekiel 36:18).

Since they had defiled it through their many sins, He purged it by removing them (v.19). But that removal carried a different message for the surrounding nations. Not knowing of His discipline, they interpreted it to mean that Israel's God was not strong enough to prevent their expulsion (v. 20). Thus, His holy name had been profaned.

The Lord could not permit this impression among the heathen to stand. As Ezekiel 36:21 puts it, He "had pity" for His own name, or reputation, and now He would bring Israel back to their own land (v. 24). Ironically, God's reputation was at stake in both the Exile and the promised restoration of Israel. His reputation demanded that He expel them for their sins, but it also demanded that He restore them again to their own land.

Therefore, as the Lord prepared to tell His people of future restoration and blessing, He made it clear that He would not do this for their sakes but for His own.

He thus declared, "I will sanctify my great name, which was profaned among the heathen, which ye have profaned in the midst of them" (Ezek. 36:23). The Lord now declared that through a supernatural work on behalf of restored Israel, the heathen nations would know that He was the Lord. Just as His holy name had been profaned in Israel before the heathen, so He vowed that He would also be vindicated as holy in Israel before their eyes. Through the Lord's faithful dealings with Israel, the nations of the world would know that He is the only true and living God.

As the Lord was zealous to preserve the sanctity of His name through Israel in ancient times, so is He zealous to do so through the church today. Jesus urged us to let our lights shine before men so that when they see our good deeds, they may glorify our heavenly Father (Matt. 5:16). How tragic it is when our evil deeds cause our contemporaries to malign His holy name!

2. How can we bring honor to God's name?

We as Christians should understand that we have a responsibility to guard the holiness of God's name. Our actions should not defile the Lord's reputation in the eyes of unbelievers. This is why Jesus taught us to pray to God, "Hallowed be thy name" (Matthew 6:9). The importance of this is shown in that it is the first request of the Lord's Prayer.

Other ways to honor God's name would include speaking well of the church and of other Christians, being a good neighbor, practicing financial responsibility, having strong marriages and godly families, and any other actions that reflect well on the God we serve.

ISRAEL'S RENEWAL— Ezekiel 36:24-27

3. How did God begin the process of restoring Israel (v. 24)?

God's primary witness to the pagans is the people He has chosen to be His unique nation—Israel. For the world to understand the nature of a holy God, it is important for His people to be holy themselves. Because of the disgrace and humiliation of the Babylonian exile, this will require total renewal.

The first stage of this renewal process is to be a gathering of the people back to the *land* that was promised to their forefather Abraham (who was previously known as Abram; Genesis 12:7). God intends that this land be occupied by righteous people (Psalm 37:29; Isaiah 60:21). This is reflected in the third Beatitude of Jesus, which promises blessing for the "meek," for they are promised an inheritance of the "earth" or land (Matthew 5:5).

4. From what sin did ancient Israel especially need cleaning (v. 25)?

"Then" introduces the second phase of God's vindication of His name. Israel, restored to their land, will be renewed spiritually, and this begins with cleansing. The Lord promises to "sprinkle clean water upon you."

Most of us take *clean water* for granted. We have municipal water supplies that provide abundant, drinkable water from the faucets in our homes. In the ancient world, though, clean water is not as common. Water stored in cisterns becomes disgusting and unhealthy over time. Clean water comes from pristine springs or from rainfall. Good water is seen as a blessing from God (see Numbers 21:16).

This image of renewal is employed by Paul when he speaks of the church being cleansed by water. This water is "the word"; its cleansing power makes the church a perfect bride, "holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:26, 27). In the Gospel of John, the figure of "living water" is used for the renewing power of the Holy Spirit (John 7:38, 39).

We are still exceedingly capable of defiling ourselves by worshiping abhorrent *idols*. We may not bow down to carved images of wood as the ancient Israelites did, but allowing anything to displace God on the throne of our hearts is idol worship just the same. True spiritual cleansing must come from God, for even our best efforts at holiness are inadequate (see Isaiah 64:6).

5. What kind of heart will redeemed Israel receive (v. 26)?

Cleansing from sin will be accompanied by inner changes that will inhibit future sin. This renewal project of God involves a "heart transplant." In the Bible, the *heart* is the seat of the will. A hard, *stony heart* is one that has defiantly aligned itself against God and rejects obedience to God's will.

To have a *heart of flesh*, by contrast, means that Israel will have a pliant heart, a will submissive to God. This is also expressed as the presence of the *new spirit*, which is the inner renewal granted by God. Earlier, Ezekiel had prophesied that this new spirit and heart would allow Israel to be considered God's people again (Ezekiel 11:19, 20).

6. Which experiences in life cause us to harden our hearts toward God? What can we do to keep them soft and responsive to His Holy Spirit?

Anytime we allow sin to get a foothold in our lives, we begin to harden ourselves against the Holy Spirit and turn a deaf ear to Him (Hebrews 3:8). Our hearts are unreceptive to God's mercy especially when we deny that what we're doing is wrong or make excuses for our actions (1 John 1:8). Allowing the busyness of life to keep us away from church services and personal devotional times makes our hearts a little harder.

Confessing our sins as they occur will help our hearts be more receptive toward the Lord (1 John 1:9). Being willing not only to forgive those who hurt us but also to be kind to them and pray for them will give us tender hearts that are more like the heart of Jesus (Luke 6:27, 28). We can pray David's prayer: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10).

7. What will the Holy Spirit enable redeemed Israel to do (v. 27)?

While inner transformation produces godly desires, God's Spirit provides the power to carry them out. The Lord promised, "I will put my spirit within you." This refers to the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity. Several prophetic passages confirm this special blessing Israel will experience during the messianic age (Isa. 44:3; Ezek. 37:14; 39:29; Joel 2:28-29). The Spirit will be manifested in ways previously unknown in Israel.

The Holy Spirit will enable God's people to obey His will voluntarily. He will "cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them" (Ezek. 36:27). The Holy Spirit will provide the inner strength to keep them consistently. The law that once lay upon Israel as an impossible burden (Rom. 3:19-20; Gal. 3:10-12; cf. Acts 15:10) will by the Spirit's power be a delight to keep.

What redeemed Israel can look forward to in the millennium we have available to us today (Rom. 8:3-4). Ever since the Holy Spirit came upon the church on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21), He has taken up His dwelling in every person who receives Christ by faith (Rom. 8:9-16; 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30). It is He who enables us to fulfill the will of God and display Christlike virtues before the world (Gal. 5:22-23).

ISRAEL'S RECOVERY— Ezekiel 36:28-30

8. What was God's promise to Israel concerning "the land" (v. 28)?

God's renewal plan includes restoring Israel to *the land*. This restoration will bring things full circle, making good (again!) on the promise to Abraham (see 1 Chronicles 16:16–18). It is with this return that the land of Canaan will become more than the "promised land"; it is to be seen as the "holy land" (Zechariah 2:12). This designation is still in common use today to refer to Jerusalem and its environs.

The oft-repeated goal of God's plan is given again at the end of this section: *ye shall be my people, and I will be your God*. This was the original intention of God when He freed Israel from the bondage of Egypt, over 900 years prior to this point (Exodus 6:7). This picture appears again near the end of the book of Revelation, where God and His people are united eternally and perfectly.

This promise still resonates with us today, for the church is made up of the people of God. We are His people, and He is our God in every possible way. We, like Israel, are called to guard the holiness of God's name, to protect His reputation from disrepute (Romans 2:24; 2 Thessalonians 1:12).

9. How will God sustain and prosper Israel (vs. 29, 30)?

The land to which God's covenant people will return will abound with His blessings. These blessings are linked with Israel's spiritual condition: since they have been cleansed, God will deliver them from falling back into sin. As a master calls for a servant to do his will, so the Lord will call forth abundant crops of grain. The harvest will be so plentiful that famine will cease to be a fear. And what God does for the grain He will also do for the fruit trees and all else grown in fields.

This reproach will finally be gone, and surrounding people will marvel at Israel's prosperity (Ezek. 36:30; cf. 34:29). The Promised Land will finally be all that God intended it to be.

ISRAEL'S REMORSE— Ezekiel 36:31-32

10. Why is loathing oneself sometimes a necessary spiritual experience (vs. 31, 32)?

Lest the Israelites in exile should still revert to pride in all that God promised for their future, He now brought them back to the reality of their unworthiness. He foretold that even in the glow of their future glory, they would reflect on their own evil ways and wicked deeds. The sheer grace manifested to them will fill them with self-loathing as they recognize their lack of merit to receive God's blessings.

Indeed, it is not just a lack of merit but downright iniquities and abominations that call forth their shame. The record of Israel's idolatry and apostasy is so despicable that the only proper response they can display will be shameful embarrassment.

Loathing oneself is considered unhealthy in a time when people are encouraged to see the good in themselves. But it is necessary if we are to appreciate God's grace as we should. His salvation for Israel and the world can become effective only in the lives of those who know they do not deserve it.

Our passage thus ends on the note on which it began: "Not for your sakes do I this, saith the Lord God" (Ezek. 36:32). The glorious future prepared for Israel will unfold only to sanctify God's name before the nations and rescue it from the contempt to which His people's sins had exposed it. The necessity of chastising them had made Him appear weak to other peoples. But through their restoration He will yet manifest Himself in all His glorious power.

CONCLUSION

The Holy Lifestyle

The holiness of God is so absolute that we are unable to comprehend it fully. Yet it is an essential characteristic in our understanding of our creator and our relationship with Him. God acts from the depths of the utter holiness of His nature.

In the Bible, holiness has two aspects. Holiness includes purity, moral cleanness. In this sense, *holy* is the opposite of *sinful*. But there is another, very important part to biblical holiness. To be holy includes the idea of separation or separateness. God is not the same as His creation. He is separate and holy. He dwells in His holy Heaven (see Deuteronomy 26:15; Psalm 20:6). God is the "Holy One of Israel," a favorite expression of Isaiah (see 12:6).

This idea of holiness as "separateness" is at the core of the Christian life. The followers of Christ should be known for their different lifestyle in light of the increasing sinfulness of our world. We should take a strong stand, opposite of the world when it comes to things like premarital sex, adultery, and divorce. Even things that were considered morally unacceptable a generation ago have found a comfortable home on our television screens.

Judson Van DeVenter (1855–1939) wrote the words to a hymn that has been used as an invitation song for thousands of evangelistic services: "I Surrender All." This classic of the faith is a prayer of submission to Jesus as Lord. The phrase "worldly pleasures all forsaken" of the hymn is in tune with this lesson. This is a great expression of the desire to live the holy life.

The lifestyle of a Christian should be visibly different to the nonbeliever. This is to be so even at the risk of coming across as "holier than thou." The reason for such a lifestyle is that the Christian serves a holy master and strives for personal holiness. In this way, we show respect for the holiness of our God's name and seek to bring respect to Him by others.

PRACTICAL POINTS

- 1.** As believers our actions, attitudes, and words should exalt and not profane the holy name of God (Ezek. 36:22).
- 2.** Our holy God desires to make us holy so that others may know Him and revere His great name (vs. 23-24).
- 3.** Only God can truly change life from the inside out (vs. 25-26).
- 4.** When God changes a person on the inside, his outside actions and attitudes will evidence it (vs. 27-28).
- 5.** The one who obeys and honors God can expect His blessings to come sooner or later (vs. 29-30).
- 6.** The more we know and love our holy God, the more we will hate our unholy sin (Ezek. 36:31-32; cf. Isa. 6:1-6).

PRAYER

Holy Father, we are the ones who violate Your holiness by our sin. We are the ones who cause the need for renewal by our disobedience. We are the ones who must live with the bad memories of our past follies. May You forgive us. May You renew us. May You sanctify us. We pray this in the name of Your Holy Son, Jesus the sinless one, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God's plans include your holiness.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Our lesson next week will help us see the wonder of the new life. The idea of a renewed human spirit is the subject of Ezekiel's experience in the valley of dry bones. Study Ezekiel 37:1-28 "A Vision of New Life " in preparation for next week's lesson.

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