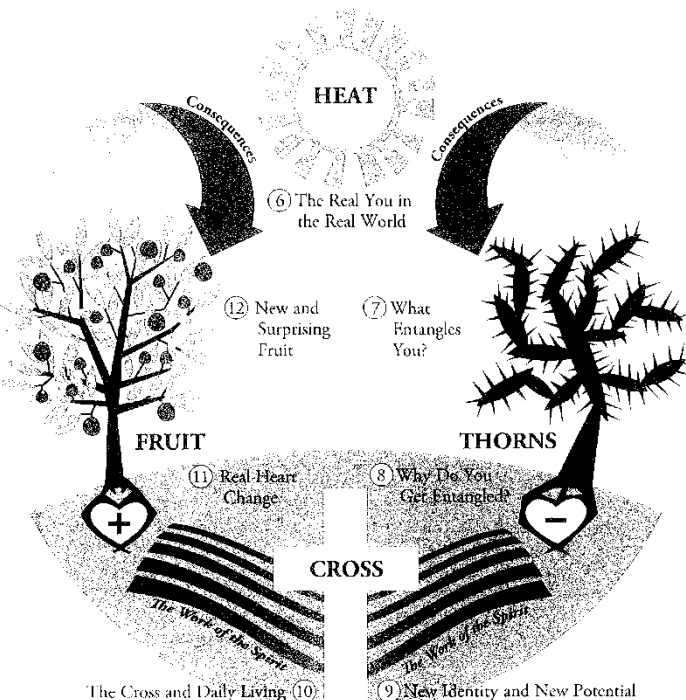


He is indeed greatly to be praised. As we turn this morning to the ground on which we praise the Lord and the reasons for which we praise him, it is that he is a God of---as we've been talking about it over the last number of weeks---rescue and restoration. And this morning we turn to this section of Ezekiel chapter 36, as we finish this series on *Hope for Change*. This is leading into one of our spring adult Sunday School classes on "How People Change," which was developed by CCEF, which is Christian Counseling Educational Foundation, of looking at the dynamics of spiritual formation, dynamics of biblical change, in the heart of anyone. How does God go about doing that?

In just a moment we're going to put up the graphic that we've been working with the last number of weeks, but let me begin by giving you what is the biblical arc of what God is doing in the lives of human beings and the ways in which he goes about change. And there is this way of summarizing it, and it's this way. We can find it from Genesis all the way to Revelation; we can find it writ large; and we can also find it, as we will see this morning, in this section of verses repeated yet again. Here's the arc: that it is God alone---Father, Son, and Holy Spirit---who has created. And he has created human beings in his image. But because of sin they have fallen. And we have fallen from that original, wonderful, beautiful, intimate relationship with a holy God. So there was creation, and there was fall. We've fallen from the estate in which we were created with God. But then God, seeing and knowing that we would fall, knowing our sin, also brings redemption, most fully seen through the cross of Christ. But the final part of that is restoration, which we see exemplified through the resurrection.

And so we have this four-fold point of a God who is a covenant, or a promise-keeping God, who makes a covenant with human beings. That God, out of his grace, has created us. We have fallen because of sin, but he redeems, but he also restores. This is a theme which is often gone over again and again throughout the Scriptures in which you will see this morning.

But we must remember that we are trinitarian in our profession of faith as a church. We are not binitarians, where we simply focus on God the Father and on Christ, but we're not really sure what to do with the Holy Spirit. It is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit that we learn---through the totality of Scripture's profession---that the three-in-one God was present at the creation, witnessed our fall, participated in our redemption, and enables us in our restoration. Because God is at work to make us holy. God is not merely saving us from sin. I say 'merely'---he is not merely just forgiving us of sin. God is about doing even more than that.



So let me put up the graphic here, and I'll point out what I mean before we get going. As you've seen this graphic over the last number of weeks, the sun and the two trees and the ground in which they are planted. The sun represents heat that each and every one of us experiences in life. Heat can be difficulty of circumstances, it can be trial, it can be suffering of various sorts. But remember, we were careful in saying heat is not just having without, or going with poverty or suffering in that sense, or disease. Suffering and heat can also come by way of great success.

How do I mean? Well, the greatest critical example of that is King David. David fell from his relationship with his wife and committed the sin of

adultery, not in a time where he was facing the greatest persecution, but during the time where he was seeing the greatest success. So oftentimes, success, as with great trial, can produce heat. And when heat comes, what is produced?

We've looked at, over the last two weeks, the following. Often what is produced is what we call 'thorns.' Thorns are the sin patterns and reactions to difficulty or success that lead us not to greater dependence on Christ, but greater dependence on ourselves. That lead us not into greater fellowship and intimacy with Christ, but lead us to have greater trust in our own agendas and abilities. That begin to erupt in us by way of blaming others or blaming God, or turning to others hoping they can fix our problems and not turning to the Lord. There are various ways in which these thorns can appear.

But then we looked at, two weeks ago as Pastor Flora was leading us, through how does God address the issue of the thorns, the sin patterns that erupt in our lives. It is through the cross. That Jesus Christ, in his birth, in his life, in his death and resurrection, is the perfect God-man who lived in our place and who died in our place. And who is the one who offers for us the ability to receive forgiveness and reconciliation with God---is through Christ alone.

But for many---not for us as a church, or our confession---but for many Christians, oftentimes this is where the gospel stops, or this is how we summarize the gospel. What I will tell you, is that if we merely stop at what Christ did on the cross in providing forgiveness by his life and his death, forgiveness for our sins, we will have sold the gospel short. And it is not the full gospel. As one writer said, if we were to simply be forgiven of our sins, and nothing else, then heaven would be full of hell.

Here is the fundamental question (which perhaps in the first service I was not very good at communicating, at least I didn't feel that way, so I want to say this as bluntly and as carefully as I can): Is the gospel just that I receive forgiveness, or is it that God means to make you and me new. And when he makes us new, living lives of obedience is not a distant hope, but an every day, constant, present reality, because of...what? the Holy Spirit.

And by that Spirit new fruit, new ways of responding, and surprising fruit begins to develop. So that the fact that heat may never disappear, and in this life we will face heat in various ways, but the prayer is and the hope is that Christ's death on a Friday afternoon leads to his resurrection on Easter Sunday morning, which leads to the giving of his Holy Spirit, not that heat would disappear, but that when it does [occur], what appears are human beings who are being made new, and we see it through the fruit. Do we believe that? Or are we selling the gospel short? Have we simply settled with just being forgiven and not being made new?

I will tell you, the Scriptures will not allow us to do that, and you will see that this morning in Ezekiel chapter 36, as God delivers through the prophet Ezekiel important words for the nation of Israel to hear as they were in exile, as they were scattered. They were taken out of the promised land and sent into exile in Babylon as they had disobeyed the Lord, they had rejected him, they had profaned his name and worshiped false idols. They were far from him in heart. How would God respond? Now remember: creation, fall, redemption, restoration. It's here also in this passage. And you also note how the triune God does his work. And then we will unpack it together.

Hear now God's holy and wonderful, life-giving word.

For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring it back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I

gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleanness. I will call for the grain and make it plentiful and will not bring famine upon you. I will increase the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field, so that you will no longer suffer disgrace among the nations because of famine.

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me. Holy Father, unless you---by your living Word together with your Holy Spirit---unless you come into us to make us new, to give us new ways of living, empowering us to follow you and to obey the things which you have given to us, I cannot speak, I'm without hope, I can't even change someone's mind---I can barely change my own. I am in need of your Spirit even to preach this word, and I am in need of your Spirit to work your power in us. Because your Spirit works with your Word to make us a new people, to produce new fruit, to bring about real change. So Lord, will you do this? Will you today remind us of how you make us holy and the fact that you desire to make us holy. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

So this morning I want you to see as we look at this passage together, you'll see it in your outline: The new identity that the Lord provides for us, and we see that in verses 24 and 25. He then does that as well by giving us a new heart, then a new spirit, to produce new fruit.

Now again back to the arc which I was telling you about. God had called the nation of Israel out. That's where we get the idea of *ecclesia*, the church, which means the called-out ones. He called out Israel from its inception as a nation not full of great strength, but a nation wallowing in weakness. A nation not known as a righteous people, in fact it wasn't a nation at all. He began with a family, and he made that family into a nation. He called them out. He created them. And he gave them his promises--his covenant, absolute, unilateral, empowered promises. And yet the people of God rejected the Lord. And the cycle of hearing the Lord and then rejecting him plays itself out over and over again. But in response to their fall, to their sin in rejecting him, God continually, over and over again, reveals his redemptive purposes. He sends forth the prophets which say, 'I am a covenant-keeping God. I'm going to send forth a suffering servant. I'm going to rescue you from the enemy nations. I'm going to provide for you.' And then he promises to restore them.

We see that here, all the way through. In the process of showing that arc in these few verses, you will see that he desires to give them first 'New Identity.' New Identity. He calls out Israel not because of who they are. So many Christians and so many people who are not yet Christians believe that God calls and chooses based on righteousness that he can see. But over and over again the Scripture's testimony is, God does not redeem because he sees righteousness. He comes to heal the sick. He comes as the great physician to heal those who are sinners, who are in desperate need of grace. God called out Israel not because of who they are, but because of who he is.

He then also says to them, I am not here to make you happy. I'm here to make you holy, as my people. And in so doing he tells them over and over again in various ways throughout the prophets that he wants to restore them to the land. But he begins here by talking about identity.

Let's look together. Verses 24 and 25. He says, "For I will take you out of the nations." What does he mean? He says that on the heels of saying this: "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Sovereign Lord.'" So he says to them, because you have profaned me, I am going to redeem you. I'm going to---verse 24---take you out of the nations, and I'm going to gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. Then he says these beautiful, simple, yet elegant words. "I will

sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; and I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.”

The Lord looks---according to his covenant promises---on a people that he's called to himself, and he sees that not only had they rejected him, they've gone out into the nations and rejected him. And they were to be a light to the world. They were to be an example of God's holiness in the world. Not by trying to be self-righteous, but by exemplifying the love, the mercy, the grace of God through their living with each other and living in the world. But they did not do that. They took up foreign gods. They took up other religions and said, God, you're not enough. We want something else.

And so he says here's what I'm going to do. Though you have done this, I'm going to bring you back. Now here he says I'm going to bring you back to the land. The land for the nation of Israel was a physical place, a place that was flowing with milk and honey, of great abundance. So it was a place for them to live. And so the nations would see that God's people, though surrounded by nations full of famine and difficulty and trial, they are a people provided for by a covenant-keeping God. So they wanted to enjoy the literal milk and honey, but the land was also to be a metaphor of being brought back into an intimate, reconciled relationship with a holy God. This was to be a testimony. And while Ezekiel cannot fully see how that was going to happen, he knows that one of his colleagues, Isaiah, has been talking about the suffering servant. This one who would come, who would be a lamb for the slaughter, who would be one who would grow up among us and have nothing worthy on the outside, but who would be one who would lay down his life for his people.

That is what Ezekiel perhaps couldn't see the fulfillment, which for us as we can see from the New Testament is indeed pointing to the work of Christ. No, we are not restored to a land, but we are restored to a relationship, which the land was to point to. And this new identity is to be reconciled to a holy God through the cleansing away of sin and the removal of devotion to false gods and false idols, and into a relationship of love and worship. This is the new identity.

And what is most interesting is that God nowhere says it's because you wanted it or that you were looking for it or it's by your own might. Over and over again we see that this is God's working, God's power. And what does this look like when one comes to Jesus Christ to rest in him alone for salvation? What do we give to a person who professes faith? We give the sprinkling of water through baptism that is an outward sign of what God does inwardly, that he speaks of here in this passage. To be cleansed through the work of Christ of our sin.

And then this morning we're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper, which is an outward sign of what God is doing. You see, he's bringing them back into a land of abundance, and he's going to give them a new celebration and a new feast---not like the nations. Same with this. That when one comes to Christ, receives the waters of baptism because of what Christ has done, you're invited into a whole new celebration, not because of its massive size, but because of what it points to. This new heart is given through the blood and body of Christ. This is what God is doing, this new identity.

And this is important to remember, because this new identity has absolutely nothing to do with your present record or your past record. It has nothing to do with how you think you're going to do with your future record. It makes no difference what your past is, what your difficulties are, what your sins are, what your heart is. This new identity is given to you so that you now see yourself as a new person because of what God has done. This is important for us to seize upon. Because for the Christian, then, your core identity is one thing. If you profess faith in Jesus Christ and you've known the power of his forgiveness and the power of his Spirit, your number one, beginning, middle and end identity is one who's been made new in Christ alone. No matter what your parents thought of you or think of you, no matter what you think of you or have thought of you, no matter what your race or your past religion, no matter what your present sin might be.

Do you hear that the Lord looks on you without favor. He looks on you according to his holiness and his desire to redeem you. And when he draws you to himself, he sprinkles you clean with the water and cleanses you and me.

And he declares you his. You are no longer yours. Which is why we can say with Paul, I don't even care what I think of myself. What matters first and most what is the Lord thinks of me. And if he is one who has restored you and redeemed you---while you were yet a sinner---how much more now does he not view you with love and grace.

May I say to you, Christian, if you profess Christ this morning, you need to ask yourself the questions: Do you know that the Lord looks on you this morning with joy? He looks on you and smiles on you and embraces you. And your praise and adoration comes not from a place of guilt or trying to gin up holiness, it comes from a heart of thankfulness. Amen?

But he does more than just give us a new identity, he gives us a new heart. He says this in verse 26: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; and I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." What does that mean, this phrase that is repeated throughout the Scriptures: I will give you a new heart. What we've done with the idea of the heart is we've set it over against the mind. And we think of the heart as where all the mushy stuff happens, and the mind is where all the really tough, hard-nose stuff happens. The Scriptures do not give us that kind of distinction. The heart is not the place where it's just all good and mushy and emotional and all that kind of stuff. The heart is the seat of the will. Because the heart is the seat of what drives our loves and our desires.

As the heart goes, so does the mind. You can have a mind that is convinced of the righteousness of God, the holiness of his laws, the rightness of his justice, and give yourself to all of those, as Paul would later say, and be found faultless, and yet your heart can be very far from God. May that not be, because what the Lord does is work from the inside out. So the heart is not the place of the mushy, emotional stuff; it's the seat of the will. And when he says I will take from you your heart of stone, I'm going to take from you your obstinacy to my ways. I'm going to take from you your will that so wants to run and escape me, and I will give you a new will, and I will give you a new volition.

He continues to think about this because he says, (and I'll get to it a little bit fuller in the next point), when he says in verse 27, "And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." You see that begins with a new heart. And we must recognize we need this new heart. Because when he says, 'I will take from you your heart of stone and put a new spirit in you,' do you know what he is saying? In this word, what Ezekiel is declaring the mouth of the Lord is this: I am about to take up residence inside you. That is not metaphor. It may be a mystery, but it's not a metaphor. What God is saying here: I am going to come into you. And God cannot exist inside a place that has not been made new. And he means to give us a new will.

So what does that look like? That looks like this. Each of us is born into sin. We don't want to obey. We don't feel like obeying the Lord. And we oftentimes think that that's what we have to do before we obey. But indeed what the Lord says here is that I'm giving you a new heart, a new spirit---therefore, a new volition. Which means if that's what the Lord promises to do, and Jesus repeats this in his teaching of the Holy Spirit, then we need to be calling on the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts this new volition. I can say with the authority of Scripture, that because God does this, we lack nothing for the life of godliness. Books are great. Conferences are wonderful. But what we need is for the Lord, by his living Word and by his Spirit, to remind us he's given us everything we need in this, and by his Spirit, in here. A new will to desire and to love him.

And that moves then to this new spirit. He gives this new heart, this new will, and how is that sustained? By this new spirit. And I love this phrase, because I need this. I don't know about you, but I try really hard to keep up my obedience by my own strength. When I don't pray, you know what I'm saying to God? I got this. I'm all good. When I'm not in the Word on a daily basis, you know what I'm saying? I got this. I'm all good.

What I need for the Spirit to do---I need for the Spirit to be the presence of the triune God changing my desires to give me the power to access the very thing that God has given, and the very thing that God commands. But when he says this: "And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws"---how many Christians today as Unitarians and not as Trinitarians. That somehow we believe that that whole cross thing...okay, okay, I got it, Lord, okay, all right. I get it. I need forgiveness and you sent your son. He died on the cross. Got it, I'm forgiven. Now I'm going to try really hard. We flip that script. We believe that what we need to do is move ourselves to obedience, then, then the Lord will give us his Spirit. Then he will love me. Then he will bless me. That is not the Scriptures. That is not the gospel. I can do nothing apart from Christ, Jesus says. I cannot pick this Bible up. I cannot desire to pick it up. I cannot pray or desire to pray, unless the Spirit moves in me.

And it is what Ezekiel is saying, way back in the Old Testament. That it's the third person in the Trinity that cannot be dispensed with. It is the presence and power of God in the life of a human being to move them to desire. So therefore I then delight in talking with him. I then long to hear from his Word. I need...I need that today. And I believe you need it, too.

But this is something that the Scriptures tell us about over and over again. I only have time for three quick verses. Romans 15:13: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." How does the Christian grow in hope? Only through the Holy Spirit.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law." But my friends, without the Holy Spirit that sounds like nothing but law. Have you ever read that list and not thought about it as something that's hopeful and to long for, but you've thought...oh hoh hoh hoh.... This last week have I lacked love? [heh.] Joy? [huh.] Peace? [You bet.] Let me ask you a question. Is this a list of law to you? I'm going to be the first in line. You bet they are to me, if I'm being honest. Which is why I need the Spirit to remind me, Hey, guess what, Randy, it's not you getting this and then the Spirit comes, it's the other way around, And it can't happen unless it's by the Spirit. And this is what Paul says: "And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." How does that happen? The fruit of the Spirit.

One final passage, 2 Thessalonians 2: "But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved through the sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." Do you see the flow? The Spirit comes in, calls us, empowers us, enlivens us, moves us, because he's moving us to reflect the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the glory is the fruit of the Spirit. We must have the movement of the Holy Spirit. And we must be praying and asking God. Lord, your Word tells me in Romans chapter 8 that I don't know how to pray. You bet I don't. May you by your Spirit hear the prayers of your Spirit and move me. And may your fruit and your power be at work in me. Can you imagine starting a day like that?

But here's the beauty. That if this what the Lord is doing, then that gives me a great deal of freedom when it comes to confession. Because I'm going to fail. You fail, as I do. So if I realize that it's not by my strength, that I can't guilt myself, I can't work myself up to it, if it's the Lord's work from beginning

to end, and he's the one who's doing it, and he's the one who's restoring---then that makes my confession all the more free. Because I'm no longer living according to my record, but on his. I'm no longer living by my power, but his. And I can come, freely confessing openly, Lord, help me. Help me. Forgive me. Sustain me.

And it's because the Lord wants to work new fruit. Isaiah speaks of it just as Ezekiel does. "The Lord will guide you always, he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land." Do you notice the presence of heat? We may live in a sun-scorched land, but the Lord promises to satisfy our needs. And he will "strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail."

So in the midst of heat of a sun-scorched land, the one who knows the Lord can have a well of living water springing up. This is the same words that Jesus would use when he is talking about the Holy Spirit. This is what will never fail. Not by my strength, but by yours. Isaiah also says in Isaiah 55: "All you who are thirsty, come to the waters; you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy. Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare."

What does this look like, then, this new fruit, at the level where we live. I have three points that I want you to consider that is available to every person that calls on the name of the Lord, because of the promise and power of the Spirit. Here are three things I want to drive you to, and then a practical application of what we've heard this morning from the Hanlons.

First. God's grace by his Spirit provides and enables every child of God to make peace. Making peace isn't a gift he just dots around to his individual believers here and there. Everyone who knows the Lord and calls on him has been given a spirit that then gives us the ability to make peace. James chapter 3: "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, and considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness." That is not just for left-handed, blond-haired, blue-eyed Christians. It's for everyone who calls on his name, because it is by the same Spirit.

Secondly. Not only can every child of the Lord be one who makes peace, but every child of God is one who can grant forgiveness. Every one. If I have given offense up to God and refuse to be revengeful towards others, then my heart is ready to grant forgiveness when the offender seeks me out. The vertical transaction between us and the Lord, and his reconciling and giving us a new identity and a new heart and a new spirit can lead to the new fruit, then, and I am ready to give out the fruit of forgiveness to whoever has offended me. And I hope I can find the same with you. Because as surely as I stand here, I will need that from you. Every single Christian has been given by God, by his Spirit the gift and ability to grant forgiveness.

But here's the one thing that your Lord and Savior Jesus prayed for you. That the world would know that Jesus is God because of our....(let's say it together)...because of our love. That's exactly right. Every single child of God has been given a new spirit to produce new fruit, and that---principle among those---is love. Love towards one another. And it makes all the difference, because Jesus prayed it for us, that the world may know that I am, because of your love. This is precisely what Ezekiel was saying to the nation of Israel when he says, speaking for the Lord, "Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the sovereign Lord, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes." Do you see the path? That the nations would know that he is holy because they see through you a holy God. Jesus prayed it with even a finer point: That the world would see and know that I am through your love. Because through your love I am witnessed to.

Stephen and Trixie Hanlon stood before us this morning to tell us in the story of a young woman named Amy, who while a college student in Australia came into contact with Christians. And what struck her was the love that they shared and experienced with each other, the love that she saw exhibited within families that profess Christ. And it caused her to wonder, why don't I see this in my faith. And as a devout Muslim at the time, she began to be concerned about what she saw not as a gift of love, but she saw malice. And then as a result of witnessing and then hearing who was behind the acts of 9/11, she made a commitment that if I learned that out of my faith came this kind of malice, I will leave my faith completely. And that is precisely what she did, because what she had seen in contrast to malice was love.

What the world is looking for in contrast to judgment is forgiveness. What the world is looking for in contrast to abuse is mercy. What the world is looking for in contrast to malice and hatred is love. This is what we are able to do as witnesses to the Lord, and this is what we are called to. And this Supper which we are about to celebrate is a Supper that declares the Lord's love to you. And as we come and celebrate, may God by his Spirit work in us this new fruit to love, to forgive, and to make peace, that we may enjoy new life, and that the world may know that Jesus is Lord.

Heavenly Father, I thank you this morning for your Word, for it is the power of God at work with the Holy Spirit to work new life in us. Lord, we desperately need new hearts, because it is at the heart that the harvest begins. May you give us this heart because of Christ, in whom we glory, in whom we trust, in whom we find refuge, and in whom we find power through the Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.