

# On A Mission From God: Becoming a Missional People From Confused to Focused

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**Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)**

*On A Mission from God: Becoming a Missional People — From Confused to Focused*

Written by: Robert Ismon Brown (bbrown@chicagofirstnaz.org)

## Background Notes

**Key Scripture Text:** Ezekiel 36:16-38; Psalm 51

## General Introduction to the Series

### Others have said...

"We must be global Christians with a global vision because our God is a global God." *John Stott*

"The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose." *C. S. Lewis*

"The key to the missionary's work is the authority of Jesus Christ, not the needs of the lost. We are inclined to look on our Lord as one who assists us in our endeavors for God. Yet our Lord places Himself as the absolute sovereign and supreme Lord over His disciples. He does not say that the lost will never be saved if we don't go— He simply says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations . . ." He says, "Go on the basis of the revealed truth of My sovereignty, teaching and preaching out of your living experience of Me." *Oswald Chambers*

"Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen; such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on earth." *John Wesley*

"Every man is a missionary, now and forever, for good or for evil, whether he intends or designs it or not. He may be a blot radiating his dark influence outward to the very circumference of society, or he may be a blessing spreading benediction over the length and breadth of the world. But a blank he cannot be: there are no moral blanks; there are no neutral characters." *Thomas Chalmers*

"If you take missions out of the Bible, you won't have anything left but the covers." *Nina Gunter*

### On a Mission: What Mission?

Our English word "mission" is borrowed from the Latin words *missio* (N), *mitto* (V). The common word, *mission*, means simply "a letting go", "an allowing", or "a setting at liberty". When a gladiator let his opponent go, his release was designated by *missio*. Discharged soldiers were also described this way. Ironically, the same term could also mean "a sending" or "dispatching". Another derivative is *missus*, which has the added connotation of "a hurling" as a sword or arrow. The public Roman games referred to "a round", "a heat", or "a course" with this expression. Once we get to the verb, *mitto*, we have similar definitions applied to actions: "to release", "to send", "to dispatch", or "to go". These primary words appear in English:

1. Mission: a special assignment which sends a person or group.
2. Missionary: a person sent on a mission.
3. Missional: (adjective) "A church that recognizes that it is sent by a 'Missionary God' into the world to be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of the Kingdom of God."
4. Missive: a written letter or message sent to an addressee.
5. Missal: a book containing the text of a worship service; could be applied to Scripture.

The primary consideration is the idea of "being sent". In the New Testament, the Greek word, *apostolos*, usually translated "apostle", means "one sent", normally by God. Persons and whole groups are "sent" on behalf of God and His kingdom. To say "we are missional" means we embrace that calling, as suggested in #3 above.

## The Hebrew Background to Missional Role of God's People

It has been argued that the Hebrews were not a *missional* people, and that they made no orchestrated effort to win pagans to the faith of Israel. As the chosen people, so the argument goes, they accepted a unique role "among all the nations of the earth", and through obedience to Yahweh's Torah they hoped to remain that way. Their frequent contacts with the *goyim* ("the nations") usually involved war, and sometimes conquest. Otherwise, "foreigners" were seen as threats to the purity of Jewish national life. **But the evidence of the Old Testament (and the New, for that matter) does not support this argument.**

From the inception of Hebrew history, from the call of Abram, a world-wide purpose stretched out before his offspring. In and through Abram's descendants, it was Yahweh's intention to bless the whole world. This lies at the center of God's covenant with him: **That covenant is essentially missional.**

"The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. 2 "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; **and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you**" (Genesis 12:1-3),

Yahweh would later further clarify the covenant in this way through the changing of his name to "Abraham":

"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be **the father of many nations.** 5 No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a **father of many nations.** 6 I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you" (Genesis 17:4-6).

Why the need for a chosen people to bless the whole world? As we have noted in previous studies, God began with a "prototype" people with whom He could establish a relationship and to whom He would give His word. Once impacted by this relationship and this word, the prototype people would become a witness to the nations around it, drawing them into a relationship with Yahweh as well. In time, the whole world would be experiencing the blessing of Yahweh's covenant.

It was, after all, the whole world that God had created. One could reasonably argue that "the mission" of God began with the creation of His world. Genesis 1-2 describes the sending forth of God's Spirit to hover over formless nature. It likewise records God's word: "And God said, let there be..." and the result of this word, "and there was...". The mission of creation was saturated with the spoken word of God, and that word effectively accomplished its purpose, bringing the universe into existence. Without question, Isaiah had this Genesis text in the back of his mind when he wrote: "...so is **my word** that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and **achieve the purpose for which I sent it**" (Isaiah 55:11).

Throughout God's creational mission, He transformed formless nature into an ordered universe, marked by design and climaxing with living things. Whatever God touched, He renewed, and when it came time to form dust into something, it was humankind He made, this time in His own image and likeness. And this creature became His principal emissary, His central ambassador to the rest of creation. From the start, human beings were sent on a mission: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. 28 God blessed them and said to them, **"Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule** over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:27-28). With the creation of human beings, the earthly kingdom of God had begun in earnest. Man and woman (Hebrew: *ish* and *ishah*) were royally placed in the garden of Eden, crowned to administer God's good creation, and to cultivate His realm. Guided by Yahweh's carefully worded mandate, they were placed over His domain, ever in the shadow of the Tree of Life, their promised inheritance if they faithfully discharged their mission.

But the mission would not be easy. Faced with an intruder in God's good kingdom, they failed to fulfill their creation mandate, but instead listened to the words of a creature rather than their Creator. Entrusted with the

task of guarding Paradise, they proved unfaithful and forfeited any immediate inheritance of eternal life. But since they had been placed over all of creation as its king and queen, when man and woman "fell" into sin, they jeopardized creation as well, placing it in bondage to the same evil that they had allowed to enter Paradise. And so, cast out, their mission grew more difficult. They would now need to contend with the "thorniness" of the world they failed to rule faithfully. Pain and suffering would accompany their creational tasks of work and childbearing. The hope of defeating evil would not be realized immediately, but, in the words of Genesis 3:15, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." Humankind's enemy would lay traps at every turn of history, in an effort to prevent the final success of God's kingdom.

Not to be foiled by His nemesis, Yahweh promised coming deliverance for humankind and creation. One day, a son of woman would be born who would defeat the enemy of God. In so doing, the "curse" placed on creation would be lifted and Paradise Lost would become Paradise Restored. The "mission" lay along the road to the coming salvation. That is why the Old Testament tells the stories of the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. That is why we read about Joshua, Samuel, David, and the prophets of Israel. Their stories are but subplots in the drama of the divine Mission, *Missio Dei*, which would bring the prototypic people to the moment of its destiny, when the "seed of the woman" would appear, as St. Paul expressed it: "But when the time had fully come, **God sent** his Son, born of a woman, born under law, 5 to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Galatians 4:4-5). This was the quintessential "sending", the true mission of God: to send His Son on a mission that would liberate humankind from the prison camp of sin, and to once more restore His people to that they could move forward with the larger mission of reclaiming God's lost creation for His purposes.

Paul, who knew his Old Testament well, articulated this even more clearly in Romans:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. 19 **The creation waits** in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. 20 For **the creation was subjected to frustration**, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that **the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage** to decay and **brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God**. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, **the redemption of our bodies** (Romans 8:18-23)

Whatever else "mission" means in relationship to the larger purposes of God, it must mean this. On that day when God made his covenant with Abram, He was embarking on the mission of bringing back his lost creation. And He intended to use His covenant people as the instruments for accomplishing this. When He "sent" them into Canaan to drive out the pagan nations, He did so in order to raise up in the earth a "people for His name". By giving them His Torah, He would instruct them in His ways and shape them into His image once more. Through the sacrificial system and the priesthood, He would forgive their sins and show Himself to be the merciful God. In Israel, Yahweh intended to show Himself glorious to all the other nations. As long as Israel obeyed the word of God, she experienced His blessing, and the nations witnessed "how great is our God". The holy life, as we examined in our previous study, was really the life of God Himself lived out for the world to see.

And the Old Testament prophets were the frequent spokespersons for this sort of mission to the world, as these passages reflect:

"Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall **I send**? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. **Send me!**'" (Isaiah 6:8).

"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. **He has sent me** to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from

darkness for the prisoners, 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor" (Isaiah 61:1-2). [Note: This was the very text Jesus quoted in his hometown synagogue, as he began his ministry. See Luke 4:18]

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.' 6 'Ah, Sovereign LORD,' I said, 'I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.' 7 But the LORD said to me, 'Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone **I send you** to and say whatever I command you'" (Jeremiah 1:5-7).

The great Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote often about this special role for Israel in her relationship to Yahweh. He was the true light and Israel was the witness to that light:

"Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: The law [i.e. Torah] will go out from me; my justice will become **a light to the nations**. 5 My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will **bring justice to the nations**. **The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm**" (Isaiah 51:4-5).

**Arise, shine, for your light has come**, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. 2 See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. 3 Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (Isaiah 60:1-3).

But like the experience of Adam and Eve in Eden, so with Israel. Her destiny lay through the "valley of the shadow of death". Exile brought her down to defeat, and only a small remnant community returned to become the home for God's Son, about to be born in her midst. Once destined to be a "light to the nations", Israel long awaited the moment when that prediction would be fulfilled in her midst. The last prophetic book of the Hebrew Bible, Malachi, describes an apathetic Jewish community, barely surviving spiritually, though it was back in its land and worshipping in its Temple. Its view of "mission" had contracted so severely, that Yahweh was actually telling His people to close up the Temple and to stop playing at being religious. Israel's own private life replaced her loyalty of Him. Yahweh deserved much more, Malachi wrote, than His people gave Him. What is the real mission of God, Malachi asks implicitly? He answers:

" My name will be **great among the nations**, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be **great among the nations**," says the LORD Almighty" (Malachi 1:11).

Israel needed a reawakening of its missional role in the world.

## Introduction

This week's study, the first in the current series, finds Israel faced with exile from their land and a fatal silencing of their mission. Among the many Old Testament writers which addressed this painful epoch of Israelite history, is the prophet Ezekiel. He was roughly a contemporary of Jeremiah, but his mission persisted well into the exile and was lived among the Jewish people living in Babylon—their conquering overlord. In our study of Ezekiel 36:16-38, we are excerpting from a considerably lengthier book of some 48 chapters. Ezekiel lived a long and tumultuous life, and the prophetic book bearing his name represents more than twenty years of history, most of which have to do with painful loss of honor and national purpose.

However, nestled in the pages of this book are also words of hope and a revival of mission. We will discover the remedy God offers His people so that they might once more take up the cause of their God, Yahweh, and become yet again "a light to the nations." The distance from national shame to world-wide glory is long indeed. How is such a restoration possible? Under what circumstances can a people, ground into the dust by arrogant Babylon, rise again? If Israel symbolizes the plight of the whole human race, what hope does Israel's resurrection offer to the rest of the world?

Answering such questions requires *vision* (Hebrew: *ḥāzōn*), and visions are the specialty of Hebrew prophets! At its very heart, the vision is *a way of seeing things*. I have argue elsewhere that prophetic vision is nothing less than *seeing the world through the eyes of God*. Prophets bring that special perspective to God's people. While it is true that prophets do many other things through their words, yet it is this special way of looking at

things which distinguishes their work. One common way of saying this in the prophetic literature is through words like, “and I looked and saw,” or “I looked and behold!” (Exodus 3:2; Jeremiah 4:23-26; Ezekiel 1:4; 2:9; 8:2, 7; 10:1, 9; 37:8; 44:4; and others). There is *looking* and then there is *seeing*; there is *seeing* and then there is *having deeper insight*.

Ezekiel is famous for his visions, and his most well-known appears in the first three chapters where 1) **God reveals Himself** in mysterious symbols: a fiery chariot with eye-bedazzling wheels-within-wheels, living beings called *cherubim*, and a glory-throne overhead. *Having a clear picture of God* stands atop Ezekiel’s priorities in his prophecy. Who is God? The answer to that question uncovers the gross idolatries and misshapen portraits of the living God whose presence once filled Israel’s national life. Through the exile, that divine presence seems dim and dark at best. The prophet is God’s messenger to restore a proper vision of the nature of God.

Along with God’s true character is 2) **Israel’s present and future condition**. In Ezekiel 37 the prophet *sees* the *resurrection* of Israel’s hope rising like dead dry bones from the dusty ground of an old battlefield littered with its dead, the fallen soldiers of a long-forgotten war. Only through God-given life can His people hope to rise again, not just for their own sake, but to become the hope of the world. For if the dead can rise, is not God truly *for us*? And if God is for us *who can be against us*? (see Romans 8:31). Even more wonderfully than the *vision of dry bones* is the image of the New Temple whose dimensions and architecture exceed anything Israel had ever known before. So remarkable is the vision of Ezekiel 40-48 we have difficulty imagining such a future Temple unless its setting is nothing less than the whole world. Its size precludes placing it on the so-called temple mount, and so Ezekiel’s vision of this New Temple points forward, not to an ordinary Temple in earthly Jerusalem, but to God Himself whose very presence will one day fill the whole earth with overwhelming glory. This glory is the future of a restored people of God — a glory destined to unite heaven and earth in God’s New Creation.

Mission gains energy from seeing its future fulfilled. Mission presses on to a God-destined goal and calls His people to join the enterprise. Ezekiel’s prophecy — in its entirety — calls the people of God to rejoin the mission. For our study this week, we examine the renewal of the mission: *from confusion to focus*.

### **The Main Text: Ezekiel 36:16-38**

<sup>16</sup> The word of Yahweh came to me: <sup>17</sup> "Son of man, when the house of Israel lived in their own land, they defiled it by their ways and their deeds. Their ways before me were like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual impurity. <sup>18</sup> So I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed in the land, for the idols with which they had defiled it. <sup>19</sup> I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries. In accordance with their ways and their deeds I judged them. <sup>20</sup> But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, 'These are the people of Yahweh, and yet they had to go out of his land.' <sup>21</sup> But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.

<sup>22</sup> "Therefore say to the house of Israel, **Thus says the Lord Yahweh**: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. <sup>23</sup> And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am Yahweh, declares the Lord Yahweh, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. <sup>24</sup> I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. <sup>25</sup> I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. <sup>26</sup> And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. <sup>28</sup> You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. <sup>29</sup> And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. And I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. <sup>30</sup> I will make the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field abundant, that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. <sup>31</sup> Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations. <sup>32</sup> It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord Yahweh; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel.

<sup>33</sup> **"Thus says the Lord Yahweh:** On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the cities to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt. <sup>34</sup> And the land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by. <sup>35</sup> And they will say, 'This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden, and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are now fortified and inhabited.' <sup>36</sup> Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I am Yahweh; I have rebuilt the ruined places and replanted that which was desolate. I am Yahweh; I have spoken, and I will do it.

<sup>37</sup> **"Thus says the Lord Yahweh:** This also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them: to increase their people like a flock. <sup>38</sup> Like the flock for sacrifices, like the flock at Jerusalem during her appointed feasts, so shall the waste cities be filled with flocks of people. Then they will know that I am Yahweh."

## Structure of the Text

When Ezekiel *heard the voice of God* or *saw visions from God*, he generally received them in a series of *cycles*. Throughout the book of Ezekiel we have numerous sections which begin in the same way as 36:16, namely: "The word of Yahweh came to me..." (3:16; 6:1; 7:1; 11:14; 12:1, 8, 17, 21, 26; 13:1; 14:2, 12; 15:1; 16:1; 17:1, 11; 18:1; 20:2, 45; 21:1, 8, 18; 22:1, 17, 23; 23:1; 24:1, 15, 20; 25:1; 26:1; 27:1; 28:1, 11, 20; 29:1, 17; 30:1, 20; 31:1; 32:1, 17; 33:1, 23; 34:1; 35:1; 36:16; 37:15; 38:1). This statement tends to introduce the main prophetic communications from God to the prophet and to help identify the key points of departure within *Ezekiel's* general outline. The word "came" is supplied by some translations, but the underlying Hebrew has simply "to me" (*ʿēlay*), preceded by the verb "to be" used in the imperfect form as part of a sequence. In other words, a series of ongoing revelations from God continues in this week's reading.

The following smaller units make up this passage:

36:16-21 — Introduction to the three oracles which follow.

36:22-32 — Oracle One

36:33-36 — Oracle Two

36:37-38 — Oracle Three

Each smaller unit is introduced with the words, "Thus says the Lord Yahweh..." This is Ezekiel's usual method for identifying concise revelations from Yahweh throughout his book as this list of instances shows: 2:4; 3:11, 27; 5:5, 7f; 6:3, 11; 7:2, 5; 11:5, 7, 16f; 12:10, 19, 23, 28; 13:3, 8, 13, 18, 20; 14:4, 6, 21; 15:6; 16:3, 36, 59; 17:3, 9, 19, 22; 20:3, 5, 27, 30, 39, 47; 21:3, 9, 24, 26, 28; 22:3, 19, 28; 23:22, 28, 32, 35, 46; 24:3, 6, 9, 21; 25:3, 6, 8, 12f, 15f; 26:3, 7, 15, 19; 27:3; 28:2, 6, 12, 22, 25; 29:3, 8, 13, 19; 30:2, 6, 10, 13, 22; 31:10, 15; 32:3, 11; 33:25, 27; 34:2, 10f, 17, 20; 35:3, 14; 36:2ff, 13, 22, 33, 37; 37:5, 9, 12, 19, 21; 38:3, 10, 14, 17; 39:1, 17, 25; 43:18; 44:6, 9; 45:9, 18; 46:1, 16; 47:13. We sometimes talk about the authoritative word of God to us by referring to "thus says the Lord..." All of Scripture is God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16-17), including the Old Testament. However, *within* the written word, are specific pronouncements from God directed to His people, having special relevance to their present situation. That's how the *prophetic* word operates. This week's reading contains three such directed *oracles*.

One brief word about the term "oracle" is in order. Sometimes these special words from God are called *hammassā*, literally, "the burden." It can also mean the action of "lifting up," as in "my soul to God." Usually, the emphasis is on the "lifting up of the voice" in making an oral pronouncement. In the ancient world, the oracle could refer to either the word spoken or the person who spoke it. Among the Greeks, the famous "oracle of Delphi" was a prophetess who uttered a word from the god, as she did in the case of Socrates when she called him the "wisest of men." Though the term only appears once in Ezekiel (12:10), the idea is present whenever Ezekiel lifts up his voice to declare "thus says Yahweh..."

## Text within Context

The book of Ezekiel is a massive collection of oracles set within the troubled times before and after the fall of Jerusalem (586/585 B.C.E.). Two significant prophets share in the agony of that event: Jeremiah and the younger Ezekiel. To Jeremiah is accorded the familiar title, "the weeping prophet." To Ezekiel we might easily

attribute a certain “toughness” and flexibility. His call, recorded in the first three chapters, places him in the very center of God’s glory-vision, whereupon he accepts his mission with subject obedience.

A simple outline gathers together the essential components of the oracle collection, the historical episodes, and the role of the prophet himself.

1. The divine throne chariot and the call of Ezekiel (1:1-3:15)
2. The prophet of doom (3:16-5:17; 6-7; 12)
3. The Glory has departed (8:1-11:25)
4. History is not kind (16:1-63; 23:1-49; 20:1-49; 15; 17; 19)
5. Salvation: Is it possible? (14:12-23; 18:1-32; 33:10-44)
6. Salvation: Yes! (24:1-27; 33:1-33)
7. The Nations: No better off (25:1-32:32)
- 8. The Good News (34:1-37:28)**
9. The Glory for the World (38:1-48:35)

From this outline we see the context for this week’s text: it falls at the center of the “Gospel According to Ezekiel” as unfolded in 34:1-37:28. A considerable amount of “bad news” has been announced in the preceding sections, as God’s glory appears one last time in Jerusalem and then makes a dramatic exit, reappearing among the exiles in Babylon. Unflattering portraits of Israel’s failure bow the head of a once holy nation. Sin seems so horrible, exile appears so final, and salvation grows so remote. Then, without warning, a fresh future storms the shackled life of the desperate nation. Ezekiel 24:1-27 marks the end of the “old world,” while 33:1-33 signals the arrival of a new one. Astonishingly, Ezekiel gets a new commission (33:1-9), the people accept new responsibility (33:10-20), the announcement of Jerusalem’s fall vindicates the prediction of the prophet (33:21-22), false hopes are at last exposed (33:23-29), and flattery is silenced — replaced by an honest realism (33:30-33).

All of this prepares the reader for the “Good News” section with its oracles of *restoration*. A number of things get restored in 34:1-48:35, and they largely have to do with renewing the honor of Lord Yahweh among people and before the world.

1. Yahweh’s status as king (34:1-31): Tyranny yields to theocracy
2. Yahweh’s land (35:1-36:15): Abandonment yields to abundance
- 3. Yahweh’s honor (36:16-38): Profanity yields to purity**
4. Yahweh’s people (37:1-14): Death yields to life
5. Yahweh’s covenant (37:15-28): hostility yields to unity
6. Yahweh’s supremacy (38:1-39:29): Gog yields to God
7. Yahweh’s presence (40:1-48:35): Desertion yields to glory

### Inside the Text

Coming on the heels of honest appraisal, this week’s text offers a new word. True, Israel has faced and at last yielded to a devastating loss: Babylon has worked her evil against Hebrew civilization, dismantling political machinery, social fabric, religious symbols and national pride. When Jerusalem fell in 586/585, more than Israel’s reputation was on the line. The God of Israel, Yahweh, suffered in the sight of the nations. He became a laughing-stock and source of derision. At stake were His power, faithfulness, covenant loyalty and love for His people. How would the nations assess the adequacy of a god who allowed His people to collapse and be folded into the empire of Babylon?

To these questions, Ezekiel directs his attention to the words of God, spoken in the series of oracles found in 36:16-38. The main points are sharp and tough:

1. God’s land was defiled (36:17-19)

2. God's name was profaned (36:20-21)
3. God's holiness must be defended (36:22-23)
4. God's people must be restored (36:24-32)
5. God's honor must be rebuilt (36:33-38)

### Introduction to the Three Oracles (36:16-21)

When God addresses the prophet Ezekiel as “son of man,” he uses a phrase well-established from the outset of the book, and where it appears frequently — over 90 times (2:1, 3, 6, 8; 3:1, 3f, 10, 17, 25; 4:1, 16; 5:1; 6:2; 7:2; 8:5f, 8, 12, 15, 17; 11:2, 4, 15; 12:2f, 9, 18, 22, 27; 13:2, 17; 14:3, 13; 15:2; 16:2; 17:2; 20:3f, 27, 46; 21:2, 6, 9, 12, 14, 19, 28; 22:2, 18, 24; 23:2, 36; 24:2, 16, 25; 25:2; 26:2; 27:2; 28:2, 12, 21; 29:2, 18; 30:2, 21; 31:2; 32:2, 18; 33:2, 7, 10, 12, 24, 30; 34:2; 35:2; 36:1, 17; 37:3, 9, 11, 16; 38:2, 14; 39:1, 17; 40:4; 43:7, 10, 18; 44:5; 47:6). Calling the prophet by this designation may mean simply that he is a “human being.” It is first applied to Ezekiel after he has witnessed an awe-inspiring vision of the glory of God in chapter 1, leaving him filled with overwhelming wonder. Conscious of his own frailty and limitations, the prophet readily accepts this form of address. His role as prophet who brings God's word is never something he takes for granted or presumes to do without God's direct authorization. This is much like Paul's understanding that we bring the Gospel “in jars of clay so that the power might belong to God and not to us” (2 Corinthians 4:7). No one can presume to undertake a mission for God in his own strength or at her own behest. Calling Ezekiel “son of man” communicates strongly that the mission is God's idea and that the prophet is simply following orders. We might even see the idea of “servant” in this simple phrase.

God begins with reference to a time in the past when “the house of Israel lived in their own land.” A chronology of Israel's history helps us locate this reference.

1. The prophecy of Ezekiel spans some twenty years, beginning with Ezekiel's call in 593 B.C.E. (1:1-2) and ending with the prophet's vision of the New Jerusalem in 40:1, sometime in 573 B.C.E.
2. Based on these orienting date formulas, the following sequence makes sense:
  - a. 592 B.C.E. (8:1)
  - b. 591 (20:1)
  - c. 588 (24:1)
  - d. 586 (26:1)
  - e. 587 (29:1)
  - f. 571 (29:17)
  - g. 587 (30:20; 31:1)
  - h. 585 (32:1; 32:17)
  - i. **586/585 (33:21): “the city has fallen,” a reference to Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem.**
  - j. 573 (40:1)
3. The date 586/585 B.C.E. marks the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by the invading armies of Babylon, in one final fatal attack against the southern kingdom of Judah — the last political entity that bore the more general name “Israel.” Technically, between 931 and 722 B.C.E., the word “Israel” referred to the northern tribes of Israel who revolted and formed a separate kingdom in 931. The southern kingdom took the name “Judah” because that was its largest and most important tribe — the Davidic tribe. After 722 B.C.E., when the northern kingdom fell to the Assyria Empire, Israel was scattered among the nations, becoming the so-called “ten lost tribes.” Once this happened, the term “Israel” might appear in conjunction with the remaining remnant kingdom of Judah. Thus, when Ezekiel 36:16 refers to the “house of Israel” as having “lived in their own land,” it could mean either the former northern kingdom prior to 722 or the southern kingdom prior to 586/585, or to *both*.
4. The phrase “house of Israel” appears nearly 1,000 times in the Old Testament and can mean: all of Israel, only northern Israel, or only southern Israel (Judah) (See the Ezekiel references: 3:1, 4f, 7, 17; 4:3ff; 5:4; 6:11; 8:6, 10ff; 9:3, 9; 10:19; 11:5, 15; 12:6, 9f, 24, 27; 13:5, 9; 14:4ff, 11; 17:2; 18:6, 15, 25, 29ff; 20:5, 13, 27, 30f, 39f, 44; 22:18; 24:21; 25:3; 28:24f; 29:6, 16, 21; 33:7, 10f, 20; 34:30; 35:15; 36:10, 17, 21f, 32, 37; 37:11, 16; 39:12, 22f, 25, 29; 40:4; 43:7, 10; 44:6, 12, 22; 45:6, 8, 17). In 4:5 it refers to the northern

kingdom and in 4:6 God refers to the southern kingdom as “the house of Judah.’ However, when God sends Ezekiel to “speak to the house of Israel,” he necessarily means the *southern kingdom*, since the *northern* one was destroyed in 722 (3:1, 4-5, 7, 17).

5. What is the object of this phrase in 36:16? If we date the oracle after 586/585 when Jerusalem had finally fallen to the Babylonians, it would be fair to say that *all of Israel* is meant. By this time, the exile of the north and the captivity of the south are accomplished facts. In their final exile, both north and south comprise *The house of Israel in Exile*.
6. By referring to the house of Israel as “scattered” and “dispersed” among the nations in 36:19, God likely means His entire covenant people who no longer *live in their own land*. The introduction to the three oracles offers an explanation for why this horrific tragedy has befallen God’s beloved people.

A great deal is made of “blood” in this introductory section. Ezekiel was quite comfortable with that theme since he was by profession a priest, as well as by calling a prophet. Blood assumed various meanings within Hebrew belief. The ethics of blood filled the Torah scrolls. Yahweh warned His people not to shed innocent blood, while simultaneously commanding the slaughter of animals in sacrifice to atone for sin. Seeing blood flow from a dying animal victim reminded Israel of the penalty for and awfulness of all forms of violence. Life must not be taken lightly, nor death concluded with impunity. Leviticus 17:11 solemnly instructed Israel, “the life of the flesh is in the blood...” When blood was shed unjustly it *defiled* everything it touched and *profaned* the ground where it fell. The earliest story of murder — Abel by his brother Cain — contained the haunting words, “Your brother’s blood cries to me from the ground” (Genesis 4:10). Eating flesh along with its blood was odious to the Jewish people, for it imitated the pagan practices which sought to imbibe the power of the animal by drinking its blood.

Ezekiel 36:17-19 connects the shedding of blood with the uncleanness of a woman during her menstrual cycle.<sup>1</sup> Torah gave strict instructions about proper hygiene during a woman’s period in order to protect her from the ill-health and contamination resulting from carelessness in such matters. There was nothing impure about the woman or her unique reproductive processes. God’s guidance, once more, had to do with honoring the human process of procreation by keeping the potential mother free from impurities which might prevent her from future healthy births. Woman is the giver of life, the source of generativity within the created order. Adam called his wife “Eve” because she was “the mother of all the living” (Genesis 3:20). Torah prescribed rituals of cleanness for women so that their “blood” would continue to be the source of life and not death.

Yahweh, in his preface to the three oracles, reminds Ezekiel how God had entrusted the “land” to Israel as an equally blessed source of generativity for a whole nation. But, by neglect and violence, Israel had subjected the land to the “blood of uncleanness.” Charged with the mission of improving the land and bringing it to fruitfulness, Israel violated the land through unclean acts, including fertility rites associated with pagan deities. That is, gross forms of idolatry had their effect not only on the people who committed them but also on the land of Canaan itself. Recall that the inhabitants of Canaan before Israel arrived had made the land unclean by their unholy acts. According to Leviticus 18:25, the “land vomited out” its former inhabitants. Yahweh warned Israel that if their actions paralleled their pagan predecessors, the same fate awaited them (18:24-28).

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<sup>1</sup> A number of recent studies have examined the significance of menstruation within a wide-range of human societies. Typically, women have been isolated during their period. A great deal of mystery surrounded the nature of the women’s blood discharged during this process. In some cases, the woman received special attention and honor, and her period was seen as marked by magical powers, as was she. Within the Hebrew scriptures, both men and women were instructed to guard themselves and those around them when reproductive discharges took place (see Leviticus 15, the main text within Torah on such matters). In societies where women were pregnant frequently, the menstrual cycle was less frequent. The biblical perspective did not associate ritual uncleanness with sinfulness. The relationship of the holy with the common comes into focus when special attention is paid to matters of ritual impurity. Hebrew religion refused sexual relations to men and women during a woman’s period. Later applications of the Hebrew *niddah* — the rules governing a woman’s ritual conduct when she was “bleeding.” See: Chris Knight, *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*. New Haven and London : Yale University, 1995; *Menstruation A Cultural History*, Edited by Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005;

Therefore, Ezekiel 36:18 states that Yahweh “poured out” His wrath on His people, even as they “poured out” blood on the land. The resulting exile is described as “dispersed, scattered, and judged.” God’s own righteous and holy nature required Him to act for the justice of His holy kingdom. God was just and justified in acting this way toward Israel. His covenant demanded sanctions against the violators, even if the guilty party was God’s own beloved nation.

Special emphasis falls on the dispersal “among the nations.” Rather than being a sovereign nation standing apart, living in security from its neighbors, Israel had become no different than the other nations whose pagan practices they had adopted. Words like “scattered” and “dispersed” connote destruction, but can also suggest the sowing of seed in the ground. Will the seed of Israel, now among the nations, take root in foreign soil and then once more yield a good harvest of righteousness? Sadly, they did not. It was one thing for Israel to *defile the land* where they once lived, but even more dreadful to *profane God’s name* in foreign lands where they were deported. Situated among the nations, Israel might have seized the opportunity to become for them “the light of the world.” That did not happen.

What does it mean for Israel to “profane God’s name” (36:20-21). Certainly it meant more than common cursing, swearing or blasphemy. Once more we see the familiar distinction between the *qādōsh* (holy) and the *hōl* (common). Ezekiel, as a priest, had a duty to instruct Israel in distinguishing these two realities (Leviticus 10:10-11). Sadly, as Ezekiel 22:26 revealed, Israel learned nothing and did “violence to the Torah.” Life in general was, by and large, *common* or simply ordinary. However, when set apart for holy purposes, things were to remain in this God-devoted service and for His purposes. Israel as a nation was dedicated to Yahweh as His “holy people,” set apart from the nations to become a light to them. God was utterly unique: there was no God like Him. But Israel, by her actions, had treated God as common and ordinary. By being expelled from the land, Israel had brought God’s uniqueness into question in the sight of the nations. In chains as prisoners of war, they went into exile, traveling alongside other POWs, the smoke from a burning and decimated Jerusalem in the background. Passing the towns along the road of exile to Babylon, Israel would encounter foreigners who would ask, “Who are these people?” The reply might have taken the form of this fictional exchange:

“Israelites from the land of Judah. Nebuchadnezzar has captured their city and deported the survivors.”

“What is the name of their god, then?”

“Yahweh, or so I’ve heard.”

“So, they are Yahweh’s people but they’ve been expelled from Yahweh’s land! Yahweh is not much of a god, then, is he? No better than the gods of all the other nations our great king has conquered. Glory to Marduk!”<sup>2</sup>

A similar taunt came from the Assyrian envoy in 2 Kings 18:33-35 in his harassment of Judah some years before the exile. In the ancient world, when a nation fell in defeat, its god fell in defeat along with it. If Judah was expelled from its land by the Babylonians, then by implication, Yahweh fell in submission to the god of Babylon, mocked as a loser among the gods. Earlier, in Moses’ time, we hear that great prophet engaging Yahweh with the words:

**Numbers 14:15-16** <sup>15</sup> Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say, <sup>16</sup> ‘It is because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them that he has killed them in the wilderness.’

**Exodus 32:12** <sup>12</sup> Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people.

Plainly, the reputation of Yahweh was at stake, and Moses rose to counsel his God not to act in ways which might bring down *shame on His name*.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel*, Downers Grove: IVP, 2001, pp. 289-290.

That is the meaning of Ezekiel 36:20 in our text, “Wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name.” Though God wanted His people to become a “holy royal priesthood” (see Exodus 19:5-6), they did the reverse and brought his name into disgrace.

In the closing words of Ezekiel’s introduction to the three oracles, God announces that He intends to change all of that: “But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.” The Hebrew word for “concern” is *hāmal* and usually has the meaning “to spare,” out of deep compassion. Negatively, it means “not to spare,” out of deep anger. Pronounced and intense emotion accompanies this term. It *matters to Yahweh* that His name has been dragged through the dirt because of the exile. It matters *deeply*. This desire to spare is not, however, for Israel, but for Yahweh Himself and His reputation, His honor. It may come as shock that God is acting not out of pity for His people but out of judicious honor for His own name.

If God expects to send once more His people on a mission to the nations, He will need to act in ways which will restore the dignity, worth, and majesty of His character in the world. No degree of compassion for Israel will help the cause if no one respects Yahweh any more.

### **Oracle One (36:22-32)**

As we commented above in our introduction to Ezekiel 36, the expression “thus says Lord Yahweh” begins each of three oracles in this week’s reading. We come to the first of these formal addresses. It begins with the unifying and jolting theme: God’s honor is at stake and He intends to restore it. Within the oracle, three lines of reasoning unpack this theme:

1. God’s holiness (36:22-23)
2. God’s people (36:24-30)
3. God’s blessing (36:31-32)

### **God’s Holiness (36:22-23)**

**It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came...(36:22)**

Walter Brueggemann, in his insightful analysis of Old Testament prophecy, refers to the book of Ezekiel through the chapter title “Only Holiness Gives Hope.”<sup>3</sup> He makes the valid point that God is not a *utilitarian* God but a *holy* one. So much contemporary Christian practice treats God as *useful*. He is treated more like a *commodity* than as Lord. Yet, the God Ezekiel worships and serves refuses to be contained, manipulated or coerced into simply “meeting our needs.” “God has no manipulable commitment to any of our structured worlds.”<sup>4</sup> From the first chapters of Ezekiel’s book, we discover a God who makes His own decisions, comes and goes as He pleases, the rider of the fiery chariot — wheels within wheels. He is a mobile God, not one bound by earthly images or humanly crafted temples. When leaving Jerusalem, abandoning Israel to exile, God doesn’t look back: the course of providential history moves forward not backward. This may strike us as stark, tough, ruthless and harsh. But when we are in dire straits, what we need is not a God who bends and bows to our momentary crisis, but One for whom the future is certain. The God of hope is the holy God.

“God refuses to be useful.” If we are to take up the mission of God in the world, might we not learn from His example? Mission must not distill into a series of practical measures focused only on the survival of the church. Mission must gain power from the “unencumbered holiness of God.” When “on a mission for God,” the temptation to excessive usefulness must yield to the weighty imperative of God’s holiness.

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989, pp. 49-87.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 54.

What then is this *holiness*, the ground for fresh mission after exile? Perhaps two dimensions combine to define it.

1. **Holiness means righteousness.** That is, it has to do with ethics and obedience to God. When we obey God, we order our lives according to the pattern of His character as revealed in His word. As a priest, Ezekiel had much to do with teaching Torah to Israel. But confined to this meaning, holiness degenerates into legalism. Something more is needed.
2. **Holiness is the character of God Himself.** Ezekiel 36:22 begins with “It is not for your sake...” giving notice that while the righteousness of Israel remains important, it is not the most important consideration in restoring the honor of God. The key term in this section (22-23) is “my name” (Hebrew: *lāšēm-qodšî*). Literally, “for name, my holy one.” God’s *name* refers to both His character *as it is in itself* and His *reputation* as it is known and seen by others. What is true of God is *always true of Him regardless of how others perceive Him*. But God is concerned that His own character become the glory, majesty and wonder of the whole world. Reputation must lead to restoration.

Israel had been responsible for the loss of God's reputation in the world. God will take responsibility to "vindicate" that name once more. The Hebrew verb used in 36:23 and translated as either "vindicate, sanctify, or show as holy," is the hiphil form which has a causative meaning: "I will cause my holiness [to be] *through you before their eyes*." Although Israel had badly desecrated God's honor by their sinful conduct, God determines to work *through Israel* to restore that honor. That is the nature of His *mission*. Imperfect, sinful, fallen Israel remains God's choice for working in the world. It is precisely through such "clay vessels" that God's glory can be magnificently seen. When God told His people that it was "not for your sake" but for "the sake of my name," He wasn't saying that Israel was cut out of the picture. Rather, Israel's utter unworthiness would be the means by which God would reveal His own great glory. If God can work through Israel — fallen as they were — He can work through anyone!

Paul wrote in similar terms when he argued that through human sinfulness God would make His glory known:

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath-- prepared for destruction?<sup>23</sup> What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory (Romans 9:23:2-23).

The center of gravity always rests with God Himself, the true focus of mission. How can God be faithful to His people if He is not faithful to His own nature, His own holiness? Should He act in another other way, steered by human pity or sentimental compassion, He would cease to be God and become an idol.<sup>5</sup>

The whole creation must know God, and Israel had once been chosen to undertake that mission. Yet their awful wickedness hampered the effort, and they became worse than the nations around them (see Ezekiel 5)! Bringing about the exile, God secured His own righteousness (sin had to be punished), but opened up a fresh cause for alarm: How will the destruction of Israel bring about the glory of God? Long-term, the answer to that question would be bound up with Jesus and the cross where the justice and mercy of God would finally meet and both the righteousness and grace of God become the light of the world.

### God’s People (36:24-30)

In the English translation, two words capitalize this section of our reading: "I will..." The Hebrew verbs contain their subject pronouns and attach them as suffixes. For example, the series begins with, "I will take you," *lāqahî*. The suffix for "I" is *-î* which is pronounced, "tee." A whole series of these verbs with the same ending appears in this section, creating a rhythmic sound: *î, î, î, î...* Consider this monumental list:

I will take you	I will give a new heart	I will put my spirit in you
I will gather	I will put a new spirit	I will deliver you
I will bring you	I will take out the heart of stone	I will summon grain
I will sprinkle clean water	I will give a heart of flesh	I will make increase

<sup>5</sup> W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary*, London: SCM, 1970, p. 496.

God chooses to enhance His own honor by acting positively toward Israel — not for Israel's sake, but for His own sake. While the word "grace" does not appear explicitly in the text, we witness the matchless outpouring of sovereign grace at the utterance of each "I will." God takes the initiative, and for everything Israel did wrong, the Lord Yahweh does right. Examined up close, what does that look like?<sup>6</sup>

1. **The deported are gathered (36:24).** The near-horizon for this promise is the decree of the Persian Cyrus, issued in 538 B.C.E., authorizing the return of exiles to their own lands and subsidizing the rebuilding of their sacred temples. Just as Yahweh brought Israel out of Egypt, He will surely bring them out of Babylon in a New Exodus and return to the land of promise. This repatriation is confirmed throughout Ezekiel's book: 11:17; 20:34-28, 41-42; 28:25-26; 34:13; 37:12-14, 21; 39:27-28. As early as the last book of Torah, *Deuteronomy*, we find pronouncement by Yahweh about the return to the land (Deuteronomy 30:3-5). However, one whole generation would largely die in exile, and a new generation would actually re-occupy their land.
2. **The defiled are cleansed (36:25, 29a).** As we have noted in 36:16-20, the cause of exile was the profaning and defiling actions of Israel, leading to the contamination of the land. To reverse this condition, Yahweh promises to cleanse His people with both "blood and water," the priestly staples of the sacrificial system which Ezekiel, as priest, knew quite well. "Sin makes us dirty. And dirt is a problem."<sup>7</sup> Our own society is obsessed with keeping the body clean, offering every sort of cleansing agent for every imaginable human defilement: "...soaps, gels, disinfectants, cleansers, scrubs, water and air filters and purifiers, deodorants and cosmetics." In less fortunate countries, having pure water to wash with would be cleansing enough. Without attention to such hygiene, social calamity awaits all of us. Nobody wants to appear dirty, smell dirty and make others feel dirty.

Were we to translate this into spiritual life, our sense of uncleanness is experienced in God's presence. Sin, like dirt, creates isolation from a holy God before whom we feel shame and unworthiness, shying away from close fellowship, fearing our spiritual "smell" might alienate.

How do we become clean? At times, God asks us to clean up ourselves (see Isaiah 1:16; Jeremiah 4:14; 2 Corinthians 7:1). Still, we do not succeed in removing *the stain of sin* (see Jeremiah 2:22 and Job 9:30-31). Part of the problem is the *accumulation of sin* across the span of life lived thus far and across the whole history of the human race. Add to this the demand placed on a *whole people*, a whole nation who stands in need of cleansing once it becomes aware of its widespread contamination. Under these circumstances, we turn to the words of David in Psalm 51:

<sup>2</sup> Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. <sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me...

<sup>7</sup> Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow...

<sup>10</sup> Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me...

God must do for His people what they cannot do for themselves. David would not find cleansing from animal sacrifices, but only from the merciful work of God in his heart. For the Christian, the words of 1 John 1:9 apply here:

<sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Perhaps one of the most defiled cities Paul ever visited was Corinth where paganism flourished and where religious worship itself sanctioned impure and unholy conduct. To them Paul wrote:

<sup>9</sup> Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders <sup>10</sup> nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>11</sup> And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

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<sup>6</sup> Chris Wright, pp. 292-299; Leslie C. Allen, pp. 178-179; John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Downers Grove: IVP, 1969, pp. 231-232.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Wright, p. 294.

Then, in a rather ironic statement, dirty people are invited to approach a holy God where they might find cleansing:

<sup>22</sup> let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:22).

3. **The disobedient are transformed (36:26-27).** Cleansing has to do with the past, in Israel's case. Their sins "separated between [them] and [their] God" (Isaiah 59:2). The double bath of blood and water — types of the death of Jesus on the cross — offers release from the dirt and defilement which drove a whole nation into exile. But a new generation returns to Canaan, and what will guarantee that they will not return to the sins of their forebears? A deeper work of Yahweh must be done on Israel — one which gets to the "heart" of the problem — literally.

Spiritual transformation requires a change in heart. From antiquity comes the proverb: "The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart." Glancing at earlier chapters in *Ezekiel*, we find comprehensive analyses of the human condition as illustrated in the life of Israel (see chapters 16, 20, and 23). The ancient people of God were persistent sinners, inveterate violators of Torah who willfully turned away from Yahweh to idols. Israel was incorrigible, not only in what they did, but in what they had become. Beyond action, as insidious as it was, lay attitude — a mentality of spirit and heart. Jesus once told his followers:

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For **where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**" (Matthew 6:19-21)

The "heart", in Jewish understanding, was the center of one's thought and choice. Not referring to the physical heart, the term however is a metaphor expressing the true "pulse" of human life. To summarize: The heart (Greek: *kardia*; Hebrew: *lēb*) consists of four elements: emotion (John 14: 1, Matthew 5: 28), will or volition (Exodus 35: 5), the intellect (John 12: 40, Romans 1: 21), and the conscience (Acts 2: 37). Each is essential. Man is to "obey from the heart ..." (Romans 6: 17). Obedience from the heart involves will and emotion and to obey requires the intellect to understand and determine. The world of Jesus' time did not think the "brain" was very important as an organ of thought or feeling. Instead, the "head" was viewed as a "source" of life for the body in some unknown way. The heart functioned as we now know the brain does. The Bible simply follows common usage so as to be understood by its readers.

Torah announced a special kind of circumcision, that of the *heart*. Jeremiah followed the same metaphor:

The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live (Deuteronomy 30:6).

Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done-- burn with no one to quench it (Jeremiah 4:4).

Earlier in Ezekiel (11:19-21), God was calling for a new heart in His people:

<sup>19</sup> I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. <sup>20</sup> Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God. <sup>21</sup> But as for those whose hearts are devoted to their vile images and detestable idols, I will bring down on their own heads what they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD."

Notice how the contrast is between a heart for God and a heart for idols. The most common medium for making an idol was *stone*. According to our reading (36:26b), Israel had a "heart of stone" implanted unnaturally within their body of flesh. How had their hearts become stony and hard? The answer lies with their wholesale adoption of idolatry as their form of worship. Turning away from the "living God," they turned toward lifeless idols of stone: idols which "had eyes, but could not see, ears, but could not hear..." As a result they became like the idols they served:

"Son of man, you are living among a rebellious people. They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people" <sup>2</sup> "Son of man, you are living among a rebellious people. They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people (Ezekiel 12:2).

### **A profound spiritual principle is at work here: You become what you worship.**

Psalm 115 confirms this idea:

<sup>2</sup> Why do the nations say, "Where is their God?" <sup>3</sup> Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him. <sup>4</sup> But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. <sup>5</sup> They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; <sup>6</sup> they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; <sup>7</sup> they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. <sup>8</sup> Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them (Psalm 115:2-8).

Since Israel had become what they worshipped — persons with stony hearts — God would need to radically remove these hearts of idol worship and replace them with *human hearts* once more. When we worship sub-human things (idols), we become sub-human beings. In order to have our true humanity restored and become more human, we must return to the worship of the living God.

The "heart of flesh" may seem like an odd way to describe something deeply spiritual! The use of the word "flesh" in its present context (36:26) is positive not negative. Sometimes "flesh" (Hebrew: *basar*; Greek: *sarx*) refers to that which is frail, weak and mortal in human beings (Isaiah 31:3), as in "all flesh is as grass" — susceptible to the withering effects of the hot sun (40:6; 1 Peter 1:24). However, weakness is not equivalent to "sinfulness." Elsewhere, when the New Testament speaks about the fallenness of human beings under sin, it uses the word "flesh" to describe this condition. By contrast, in Ezekiel 36:26, "flesh" stands in contrast to "stone," and it is to that difference we look for understanding of the word. Here, it means that which is alive and wholly human — human as God intended Israel to be.

The source of this new life lies with God's Spirit (36:27) which He promises to "put within you." It was common to find the Spirit *coming on* famous Old Testament personages, and then, just as quickly, departing. The Spirit was God's empowerment for certain chosen prophets, leaders, warriors, and priests. What we see in Ezekiel is something completely new: God's Spirit taking up residence within His people in such a way as to "cause them to walk in His Torah." Whatever had been lacking in their "heart of stone" is more than exceeded in their new heart animated by the Holy Spirit. There is precedent for this radical "heart transplant" as foreshadowed in the words of Yahweh to Israel just before they entered Canaan:

"And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, <sup>2</sup> and return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, <sup>3</sup> then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. <sup>4</sup> If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. <sup>5</sup> And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. <sup>6</sup> And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. <sup>7</sup> And the LORD your God will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you. <sup>8</sup> And you shall again obey the voice of the LORD and keep all his commandments that I command you today. <sup>9</sup> The LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your cattle and in the fruit of your ground. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers, <sup>10</sup> when you obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that are written in this Book of the Law, when you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deuteronomy 30:1-10).

All of this similarly anticipates Paul's words about the Spirit-filled life in Romans 8:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. <sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the

flesh, <sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:1-4).

4. **The disgraced are restored (36:28-30).** Leaving the land in chains, led by Babylonian soldiers, was a shame to Israel. As we have noted previously, a strong bond grew up between people and their land. If a people was forced to leave their land, it must have been for serious offences committed against it. In effect, the people were no longer worthy of their land. Such disgrace required a definite act of God whereby He once more re-established the people-land covenant. That is why 36:28 begins with God's confident promise, "You shall dwell in the land that I have to your fathers..." Reaching back to the promise made to Abraham (Genesis 12:1; 15:7), God tells His exiled people that He will renew the land covenant with them. Nor is their arrival back in Canaan merely a formality. Their future life in the land will be fruitful and abundant (36:29-30), free of famine and its "disgrace." The language of famine reminds Israel of both Egypt and the instances of siege imposed by Assyria and Babylon. The three-fold plagues of "famine, sword and pestilence" frequently appear together as judgments on the wicked (see Ezekiel 6:11-12; 7:15; 12:16; 14:21). Once back in their land, famine is displaced by "the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field" which, in the words of the prophet, will be "abundant" (36:30).

As a priest, Ezekiel not doubt recognized the language of Leviticus 26:

<sup>3</sup> "If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, <sup>4</sup> then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. <sup>5</sup> Your threshing shall last to the time of the grape harvest, and the grape harvest shall last to the time for sowing. And you shall eat your bread to the full and dwell in your land securely. <sup>6</sup> I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. And I will remove harmful beasts from the land, and the sword shall not go through your land. <sup>7</sup> You shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. <sup>8</sup> Five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall chase ten thousand, and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. <sup>9</sup> I will turn to you and make you fruitful and multiply you and will confirm my covenant with you. <sup>10</sup> You shall eat old store long kept, and you shall clear out the old to make way for the new. <sup>11</sup> I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. <sup>12</sup> And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people (Leviticus 26:3-12).

Notice how God promised to make his dwelling among His people and no longer abhor them. This becomes evident by the fruitful and flourishing land all around them. It is as if the *prosperity of the land* bore witness to the *presence of the Lord*. God's glory shone forth from the abundant harvests. This is, of course, far beyond the simplistic idea sometimes communicated by the so-called prosperity Gospel which promises abundance by sowing seeds in an almost mechanical fashion. By contrast, Ezekiel's God takes the initiative and offers to an undeserving people a new wave of His blessing.

The presence of God among His people is affirmed in Ezekiel 36:28 in the words, "you shall be my people, and I will be your God." This is not a matter of Israel living up to God's expectation, doing exactly what He asked, and therefore reaping the benefits of obedience. Instead, God plunges forward in bringing Israel back to her land, surrounding them with His blessing, and proving to the watching world that He is committed to bless His people — no matter what may happen to them. The statement, "You shall be my people," looks less like a mutual exchange of affection and more like the determination of God.

#### **God's Blessing (36:31-32)**

The closing emphasis of Oracle One has to do *the effect God's blessing will have on Israel*. If we place these two verses in the wider context of 36:1-15 which precedes this week's reading, we discover *the effect of the exile on Israel*. Led off into captivity, they experienced shame, plunder and taunts from their enemies. What God would do ultimately was lift that shame suffered through the scorn of the nations (36:15). However, as we have already noted, Yahweh Himself had been shamed by the exile as well. These twin cases of disgrace receive treatment in the closing words of the oracle.

In some ways, 36:31-32 seem contradictory. Though God has promised a series of blessed reversals to Israel, they are, after all, "not for your sake" (36:32), but for Yahweh's. God chooses to bless without regard for Israel deserving the blessings. That is the irony. We might say that Yahweh *shamed His people* by His lavish outpouring of favor resulting in return to the land and the fruitful life which follows. Israel, loathing their own sin, will say,

"We do not deserve the favor of God, yet He pours it out on us *as if we were righteous and had earned the blessings*. We know that we do not deserve this blessing, but He gives it to us anyway. To outsiders, it might appear that we had done something which merited the fruitful fields and abundance showered down on us. But we know better. We know how unworthy we are of God's mercies. In our shame, God blessed us; in our blessing, He shames us."

Christopher Wright observes:

It is actually a mark of true conversion — proof of the "new heart and new spirit" — that one becomes more concerned for God's reputation and glory than for one's own self-vindicating excuses. It is no burden, then, to acknowledge that what God has accomplished in forgiving and restoring us is for his own sake; in Christian terms, ultimately for the sake and the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 32 can be twisted to sound as though God's forgiveness is reluctant and self-interested, while all that is left to humans is shame and disgrace. The truly forgiven sinner, however, has no difficulty responding positively to its truth. The only grounds on which he or she could plead for forgiveness in the first place is the character of God as loving, faithful and consistent to his gracious covenant promises. It is to God's own glory that his response to the repentant is always and everywhere and to everyone the same. It is God's name that is glorified, God's reputation that is enhanced, when guilty sinners like me, who know what it is to be ashamed and disgraced for our conduct, hear the words of pardon, feel the water of cleansing and long to demonstrate a new heart and a new spirit in fresh obedience through the power of his Spirit. With such emotions in one's heart, the dominant longing is for God to be honored and praised for his incredible and abundant grace and mercy.<sup>8</sup>

### **Oracles Two and Three (36:33-38)**

Both Oracles Two and Three have to do with rebuilding the reputation of God. Perhaps the most eloquent statement of that fact comes at the end of Oracle Two (36:36) and at the end of Oracle Three (36:38), where the language is virtually identical:

Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I am the LORD (36:36a)

I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it (36:36b).

Then they will know that I am the LORD (36:38).

In each case, the covenant name for Israel's God is used: *Yahweh*. And in each case, God is concerned that "the nations" who witnessed the exile in the first place, also witness the restoration of Israel to their land. Of special importance is the name of God, and in the last half of 36:36, the prophet is careful to unpack the true meaning of this mysterious and wonderful name:

I am Yahweh (*'ānî Yahweh*): the implied *present* state of being.

I have spoken: the implied *past* state of being (the simple perfect introducing an implied *future*).

I will do it: the implied *future* state of being (the *consecutive* perfect, "A *in order that* B").

To affirm "I am Yahweh" means that God is not limited by the state of time or being. He is Lord of past, present and future. That is, in essence, the meaning of the name "Yahweh," which is a variant form of the verb "to be" in Hebrew. We might condense the meaning of Yahweh this way: "I *Am* the One Who *Was* and Who *Will Be*." He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8), the One Who Is, Was and Will Be (Revelation 1:4, 8; 4:8).

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<sup>8</sup> Chris Wright, pp. 300-301.

What the exile did for God was to call His character into question. Is this God of Israel — this Yahweh — truly God? Can He be counted on to save His people in their distress? Is He able to rescue them from their calamity? Is He greater than all other gods (see Exodus 18:11; 2 Chronicles 2:5 for this sort of language)? In effect His *Name* which stakes out a claim to His uniqueness had been dragged through the dirt of national collapse and ridicule. Among the nations who saw the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, Yahweh had *fallen*. Will He rise again? Israel had fallen? Will Israel rise again? Those two questions are inextricably connected in Ezekiel's prophecy. The answer to the Israel question contains the answer to the Yahweh question.

The last two Oracles of this week's reading address themselves to these questions. In **Oracle Two** we read:

1. God will cleanse the sins of Israel, allowing Him to rebuild their cities and fill them with His people who will till their land again. Desolation will be replaced with growing crops (36:33-34a)
2. The result: those who pass by will say that the desolate land has become like the Garden of Eden (36:34b-35)
3. This will cause the nations around Israel to know that Yahweh is truly God, the one who is, was and will be; that He who speaks, does what He says (36:36).

In **Oracle Three**, God grants a strange but wonderful privilege to His people: the right to ask Him for something. This might strike us as tough, cold and formal — not the sort of thing we might expect of the father welcoming home His prodigal son! But Israel has strayed far from the covenant and has little or no sense of their renewed obligations to Yahweh who has so graciously brought them back from exile to their homeland. Listen to the words of Yahweh: "This also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them..." (36:37). In the Hebrew language, there is a verb form known as the "niph'al" and usually functions as the passive or reflexive voice. The verb *dārash* means "to seek, ask" when used in the *qal* verb stem. When put in the *niph'al*, it means "to be sought, asked," and that is its use in the present context, translated here as "let ... ask." God gives Israel permission to ask Him to multiply them *like a fruitful flock of sheep*.

Ezekiel explains the use of the "flock" metaphor. Such flocks were bred for sacrifices and for use at festival celebrations (36:38). At first glance, this might seem to be a wholly inappropriate figure of speech. What is Yahweh telling His people? Are they to become "sheep for slaughter"? That would hardly fit the tone of the chapter! If Israel is God's flock, then He is Israel's shepherd once more. Their role as sacrifices and food for feast days betokens not death and destruction, but dedication and service to God. Perhaps the closest comparison comes from the New Testament:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present *your bodies as a living sacrifice*, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Romans 12:1).

Israel is to pray to God, asking Him to multiply them as a fruitful flock so that they might offer praise to His name and dedicated service to his holy worship.

There is a dual implication in the use of "sheep" — one which we cannot escape. Yes, Israel had been like sheep "led to the slaughter" of exile. And, yes, Israel had lost their way, sheep wandering without a shepherd and outside their land, lacking pasture. But God has reversed their fortunes and brought them back into their land even though they have not repented nor turned back to Him. He will now place into their hearts a new spirit of prayer which asks not for their own sake, but for His. "Let us be, O Lord, your living sacrifices and offerings of service. Let us become your sheep again whose sacrifice of service brings light to the nations and restores the honor of Your Name."

### **Clean Heart: A Reprise (Psalm 51:1-19)**

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. <sup>2</sup> Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! <sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. <sup>4</sup> Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. <sup>5</sup> Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. <sup>6</sup> Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart. <sup>7</sup>

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. <sup>8</sup> Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. <sup>9</sup> Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. <sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. <sup>11</sup> Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. <sup>13</sup> Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. <sup>14</sup> Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. <sup>15</sup> O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. <sup>16</sup> For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. <sup>17</sup> The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. <sup>18</sup> Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem; <sup>19</sup> then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Among the psalms of David, none is more moving than Psalm 51. Here we encounter the King of Israel lying prone before Yahweh, confessing his sin with Bathsheba, his murder of her husband Uriah and the cover-up which followed. "Outed" by Nathan the prophet, David enters "the dark night of his soul". Old Testament commentator, Derek Kidner, suggests a simple outline:

- a. Appeal (51:1-2)
- b. Confession (51:3-5)
- c. Restoration (51:6-9)
- d. Renewal (51:10-13)
- e. Humble Worship (51:14-17)
- f. A people's prayer (51:18-19)

The Hebrew language is rich with words about making something clean. This psalm alone exhibits quite a repertoire. Equally evident are terms for the idea of *sin*. We have already commented on the problem of Israel's uncleanness — the presence of "dirt" which defiles and defaces the holy people of God, dragging the reputation of the Holy One through the mud of impurity. In this psalm, King David, recently fallen into his own sinful quagmire, seeks to wash his heart and restore his spirit.

1. **"blot out my transgressions" (51:1)**. The Hebrew word for "blot out" is *māḥah* which means "to wipe out, exterminate" based on the underlying root "to strike," as from someone's memory the awareness of something, or as from a book a record written against an accused (see Exodus 32:32; Numbers 5:32; Colossians 2:14). "Transgressions" result from acts of "rebellion" expressed in the word *pāsha*'.
2. **"wash me thoroughly from my iniquity" (51:2a)**. *kābas* is the technical term for a fuller's treading on clothes in the process of laundering them. This word appears some 51 times and is especially common in *Leviticus*, the Torah book focused on purity and priestly purifications. The actions of treading, kneading and beating in cold water produce a thoroughly clean garment. Never applied to anything but clothing, the verb emphasizes rigorous actions to remove dirt. "Iniquity" (*'ōn*) refers to actions which make one *guilty* and for which there is a *penalty*. Thus the reason for the vigorous method of removing impurity: to remove the guilt and penalty for sin.
3. **"cleans me from my sin" (51:2b)**. "Cleans" is the word *ṭāhar* and emphasizes the result of the purification process: that a person might finally be clean. The writer uses the *piel* verb stem which, in this case, means *to cause the state of cleanness*. "Sin" is from the Hebrew verb *ḥattā'th* that which requires a sin-offering or that which requires punishment or that which must be cleansed.
4. **"purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean" (51:7a)**. The language in this case is recapped from the previous verses, but the reference to *hyssop* alludes to the cleansing of a *leper* who was sprinkled seven times with blood (see Leviticus 14:6ff). Similar cleansing applied to persons who touched a dead body (see Numbers 19:16-19). Once the leper showed no signs of his sickness, he presented himself to the priest for the official pronouncement, "Clean!" The psalmist looks to God for that pronouncement, only in this case, from his sin. To be "clean" in this context means to be "de-sinned," if such a word actually existed in our language!
5. **"wash me and I shall be whiter than snow" (51:7b)**. Though rare on the plains of ancient Israel, snow did occur on the mountain tops, and the prophets used it as a metaphor for purity (see Isaiah 1:18).

6. **"blot out all my iniquities" (51:9b).** Again, no new terminology, except to lay stress on the *completeness* of the cleansing: "all" my iniquities. This request is prefaced by the psalmist's plea that God "hide" His "face" from his sin. The word "to hide" is *sāthar*, with the *hiphil* verb stem, laying stress on *causing* the face to be hidden — an intentional action of God for the benefit of the psalmist. The same verb appears in contexts where God is a "shelter" to the threatened soul in need of protection. Isaiah 53:3 uses the same word of the Messiah from whom God *hides His face*, as he undergoes the sufferings on behalf of Israel's sins.
7. **"create in me a clean heart, O God" (51:10a).** The pleas of 51:10 belong together: the deliberate act of God whereby He creates a clean heart accompanies His deeper work of renewing a right spirit. Of special note is the use of the verb *bara'* which means "to create" and appears in Genesis 1:1 which announces the creation of "heaven and earth." What God does for the penitent sinner, like David, is not only remove his sin as an act of purification, He also does a *new work, a creative work* of placing a new heart within him. We see the similarity to both Ezekiel and Jeremiah, as explained above.
8. **"renew a right spirit within me" (51:10b).** "To renew" (*hādash*) means "to repair, bring back." Both clauses of 51:10 are in parallel with each other, as we would expect within Hebrew poetry. "Heart" and "spirit" are called "the springs of life" in Proverbs 4:23 — that is they reside at the place of life's source. The two words are slightly distinguished in this verse, leading me to suspect a *synthetic parallelism* rather than a *synonymous* one — the psalmist adding a new thought when he writes about the renewing of a "right spirit." The "spirit" of a person is literally his *personality* and source of his *personal identity*. God does not obliterate the person when He creates the clean heart, though that is surely a creative act — a new creation. Within the heart a new reality is created, and, as a result, the person is renewed and made to be "steadfast," which is the meaning of the Hebrew term *nākōn*, "to be firm, set up, stable, secure, enduring, established."

All of these statements have to do with a transformation experienced by the psalmist. God will do something remarkable for him, something described with words of *cleansing* and *restoration*. But the psalmist does not make these various requests *for himself* so as to give relief to his predicament and failed condition. He does not ask Yahweh for a clean heart and a firm spirit so that he can boast of his new acquisition. Instead, in two specific statements, David justifies these requests as *opportunities for mission*:

1. "Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you" (51:13). Since David considers himself a transgressor and sinner — words applied in the previous verses to himself — he sees the opportunity to *teach other transgressors and sinners* what he has learned from his near-fatal experience. Being a sinner does not disqualify a person from the kingdom of God, but may well equip him with fresh insight into how it is that God forgives, cleanses and restores sinners. *Mission begins with the personal transformation of the missionary*, her forgiveness and cleansing, and the everlasting gratitude that God saved a sinner like her. We are reminded of Jesus' encounter with the sinful woman who anointed him and the beautiful meditation Jesus offered to his critics who questioned the appropriateness of her actions and Jesus' acceptance of them:

<sup>36</sup> One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. <sup>37</sup> And behold, a woman of the city, **who was a sinner**, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, <sup>38</sup> and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. <sup>39</sup> Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, **for she is a sinner.**" <sup>40</sup> And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher." <sup>41</sup> "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" <sup>43</sup> Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." <sup>44</sup> Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup> Therefore I tell you, **her sins, which are many, are forgiven— for she loved much.** But he who is forgiven little, loves little." <sup>48</sup> And he said to her, "**Your sins are forgiven.**" <sup>49</sup> Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" <sup>50</sup> And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:36-50).

2. "Deliver me from my bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise" (51:14-15). David's psalm is "the song of the soul set free." Who can sing with greater gusto or praise with nobler words than the one who is forgiven? As Paul reminds us: <sup>7</sup> "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; <sup>8</sup> blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin" (Romans 4:7-8), words taken from Psalm 32:1-2, another psalm of praise from the hand of David.

***Mission gets its voice from the forgiven heart filled with praise to God.*** *Mission* tells the world about the forgiving God who accepts sinners into His family by washing away their sins. The focus is not on the chaos of human failure but on the character of the holy Father who makes all things new.

## Concluding Thoughts

We turn finally, to Christopher Wright's thoughtful questions and reactions to the meaning of the mission of God. These are taken from his larger work, *The Mission of God*:

We ask, "Where does God fit into the story of my life?" when the real question is where does my little life fit into this great story of God's mission. We want to be driven by a purpose that has been tailored just right for our own individual lives (which is of course infinitely preferable to living aimlessly), when we should be seeing the purpose of all life, including our own, wrapped up in the great mission of God for the whole of creation. We talk about the problems of "applying the Bible to our lives," which often means modifying the Bible somewhat adjectivally to fit into the assumed "reality" of the life we live "in the real world." What would it mean to apply our lives to the Bible instead, assuming *the Bible* to be the reality — the real story to which *we* are called to conform ourselves? We wrestle with the question of how we can "make the gospel relevant to the world" (again, at least that is clearly preferable to treating it as irrelevant). But in *this Story*, God is about the business of transforming the world to fit the shape of the gospel. We wonder whether and how the care of creation, for example, might fit into *our* concept and practice of mission, when *this Story* challenges us to ask whether our lives, lived on God's earth and under God's gaze, are aligned with, or horrendously misaligned with, God's mission that stretches from creation to cosmic transformation and the arrival of the new heaven and new earth. We argue about what can legitimately be included in the mission God expects from the church, when we should ask what kind of church God expects for his mission in all its comprehensive fullness. I may wonder what kind of mission God has for *me*, when I should ask what kind of me God wants for *his* mission.

The only concept of mission into which God fits is the one of which he is the beginning, the center and the end... And the only access that we have to that mission of God is given to us in the Bible. This is the grand narrative that is unlocked when we turn the hermeneutical key of reading all the Scriptures in the light of the mission of God.

It was the risen Jesus...who opened the eyes of the disciples to understand the Scriptures, by reading them in the double light of his own identity as the Messiah and of their ongoing mission to all nations in the power of the Spirit...

It is the risen Jesus who alone is worthy to open the scroll, signifying the meaning of all history. And his worthiness and authority to do so rests on the cross, which is redemptive, universal and victorious (Revelation 5:9-10). Christ crucified and risen is the key to all history, for he is the one who accomplished the mission of God for all creation.

If then, it is in Christ crucified and risen that we find the focal point of the whole Bible's grand narrative, and therein also the focal point of the whole mission of God, our response is surely clear. Before we set about the essential task of working out what it means in practice that Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21), in terms of our personal participation in God's mission in our own context and

generation, we first of all need to kneel with Thomas before Christ and confess, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).<sup>9</sup>

Glory to God. Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006, pp. 533-535.

**Digger Deeper:** *On a Mission from God: Becoming a Missional People — From Confused to Focused*  
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *On a Mission from God: Becoming a Missional People — From Confused to Focused*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Our series is about "mission" and what that looks like in the life of God's people. Offer a definition for "mission" as it applies to Christians. Try to include at least three key ideas in your definition.
2. The mission of Israel seemed a failure because of the Babylonian exile. Ezekiel was God's chosen prophet to help Israel recover their mission. According to Ezekiel 1-3, what was God's first strategy to give Ezekiel a fresh vision of Israel's mission?
3. Our first reading is Ezekiel 36:16-38. Carefully read the text and see if you can find the natural divisions, forming an outline.
4. What words or phrases are repeated throughout this passage, and what importance do you attach to them?
5. Looking at the big picture, fill in the blanks for each of the following main divisions:
  - a. 36:17-19 – God's land was \_\_\_\_\_.
  - b. 36:20-21 — God's name was \_\_\_\_\_.
  - c. 36:22-23 — God's holiness must be \_\_\_\_\_.
  - d. 36:24-32— God people must be \_\_\_\_\_.
  - e. 36:33-38 — God's honor must be \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Discuss God's mission in terms of His honor and His name. Compare Ezekiel with the following texts: Numbers 14:15-16; Exodus 32:12. Comment on the connections.
7. What does Ezekiel tell us about the holiness of God in 36:22-23?
8. In 36:24-30, several statements begin with "I will." List each one and briefly suggest what God intends to do for Israel. Are God's intentions in any way dependent on what Israel will do? Explain.
9. What does God promise to do for Israel's heart in 36:26-27. Compare these verses with the following texts: Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; Ezekiel 11:19-21; Jeremiah 31:33.
10. Explain the symbol of the "heart of stone." How does the heart of stone relate to "images of stone" which Israel had falsely worshipped? Study these additional related passages: Ezekiel 11:19-21; Psalm 115:2-8. Discuss this statement: "You become what you worship."
11. Based on reading 36:21-32, comment on this statement: "God *shames* His people with His blessings."
12. God maintain the honor of His *name* in 36:33-38. Notice the "I am" statements in this passage. How do they relate to the name of God? What is His covenant name? What does it mean? Compare Exodus 3:13-15. In what sense is our mission *to uphold the honor of God's name*?
13. Our second reading is Psalm 51:1-19. Assuming the following divisions, outline the psalm: 51:1-2; 51:3-5; 51:6-9; 51:10-13; 51:14-17; 51:18-19.
14. Identify the different words the psalmist uses for the "removal" of sin from our hearts. Now note the different words he uses for "sin." What is God commitment to His sinful, fallen creation?
15. What special attention does God give to human beings in 51:10? How is this part of His mission? What is the significance of the words "create" and "renew" as they are applied to "heart" and "spirit"?
16. For what purpose does the psalmist ask God to remove sin from his life, according to 51:13-15? In what sense does the psalmist see his own mission in terms of these actions?