

Ezekiel Sermon #3 2019, “The God of Restoration”

Text: Ezekiel 36:22-32

Big idea: “God restores His people – and life can’t go back to normal”

One of my favourite shows is the Simpsons. In fact, it was a staple feature in my home growing up. Here’s me with some family friends **recently**. There’s me, my Dad, my brother and a family friend.

You’ll notice Mum isn’t in that photo. That’s because she *hates* the Simpsons. She’d walk into the room when we had it on and go, “Oh, that *stupid* show again.”

And look, in her defense, she was *right*. It’s a pretty dumb show.

In fact here’s one of the dumbest things about the Simpsons. **This** is Bart Simpson in the 1990’s, when the show first aired. And **here** he is today, in 2019. Can you see the difference?

Well, that’s because nothing ever changes in the Simpsons. This is common in sitcoms. Have you noticed it?

At the end of just about every episode, everything goes “**back to normal.**” Whether Homer gains 100kg from eating too many donuts, or Principal Skinner’s secret identity comes out, or Bart learns an important lesson about studying, everything just goes back to the way it was. Homer’s back to his normal body shape. Everyone acts like the Principal never *had* a secret identity. Bart goes back to underachieving. This is a show that’s been running for 30 years, and barely anything ever changes.

Now, we know life isn’t really like that.

But it’s kinda funny. Here in the book of Ezekiel, perhaps the Israelites are thinking about their situation like it’s an episode of the Simpsons.

They’ve been living in exile because of their sin, and now God speaks good news – I’m going to bring restoration! Woohoo! We’re going back home! And finally, everything will be back to normal. Like this exile never happened.

It was an episode where everything was bad, and then God made it good – **roll credits**, and now we're back to how we were before!

And some of us *today* might think about the Christian life in a similar way.

There's an "episode" of our lives where things were bad, but then God brings restoration! He saves us through Jesus! He gives us eternal life! And then... everything goes back to normal. Day to day, we live as though nothing's really changed.

As we finish the book of Ezekiel today, we see that God's picture of life with Him isn't like a Simpsons episode. Things don't just go "back to normal".

In fact, when God brings restoration, it turns everything upside down! Because when we see the 'true picture of God,' and the kind of restoration He brings, life simply can't go back to normal.

And so today we'll see three things – the surprising **reason** for God's restoration, the life-transforming **result** of God's restoration, and the startling **response** to restoration.

Let's pray as we dive in.

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Open with me to Ezekiel 36:22. It's on page 724 of your church Bibles.

First we see the surprising **reason** for restoration. Why is God choosing to restore His people?

You might've seen a show on Netflix called "**The Good Place**." There's a woman, Eleanor, who wakes up after being hit by a car, and she's in... "The Good Place." Only she doesn't belong there. She soon realises that she belongs in the Bad Place, but she's gotten mixed up with a woman of the same name. And so the show follows this bad person who somehow made it to the Good Place.

What's interesting is that Eleanor starts to become a better person. She goes from crude and selfish and mean-spirited to... well still crude, but selfless and kind. And the message of the show, really, is we're not fundamentally bad people. We're good people at heart. And if you take someone who looks bad and put them in a good environment, their true nature will emerge.

That's a fairly common view today – "we're good at heart."

We might assume that God is now restoring the Israelites because they deserve it. They're good at heart. They've learnt their lesson from the exile and now everyone can see how they've become good.

But that's **not** the reason for their restoration. Read v22:

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: 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.

What does God say about the Israelites? Not that they're good. Actually, they've *profaned his name* among the nations.

What does that mean? To "profane" something? Well we know what 'profanity' means... but it's not like the big problem is the Israelites' potty mouth.

To 'profane' something is to make it 'unholy.' So you take something holy and sacred, and bring it down so that it seems ordinary and common.

Which is exactly what the Israelites did *before* their exile by worshiping false gods. "Our God is just like any other. You can worship anyone or anything, it makes no difference."

But also think about how God's name is 'profaned' now that they're in exile.

Because what does God look like to the other nations? Think about it. [Imagine this dishevelled line of Israelite captives shuffling into the Babylonian Prisoner of War camp. And one of the guards turns to another and says, "Who are these losers?" ... "Oh, they're the Israelites." ... "Oh, those ones who follow Yahweh? Huh. Guess he couldn't protect them." "Yeah. Not like our god. Praise to Marduk!"](#)

See the problem? What does God look like to the nations? Weaker than their own false gods.

The holy name of God has been brought low by the Israelites.

And so now God will bring restoration to the people of Israel. But not because they're good or because they've earned it.

Rather, God will do it to restore his reputation. He'll do it "for his own sake." Do you see that there? **"It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name."**

We might not often think about things this way. We probably focus easily on the problem for the Israelites. They're in exile. They're suffering. Of course God should restore them! Of course he should fix their problem!

But what about the problem for God? The problem that His name is being brought low?

[We might need to shift our perspective here. Like this week when I had hanging a mirror at home. I put it up on the wall and thought, "perfect!" I can see my head, my shoulders, great. And then I remember that I've got a wife who's literally a foot shorter than me. Ah.](#)

So think about this perspective shift – the biggest problem here is not the Israelites' problem. It's that God's reputation is being *profaned*.

And so he is about to act... for HIS OWN SAKE. This is **the reason for restoration**. God will restore the Israelites ultimately to restore the reputation of His name.

In fact this is what really motivates God. It's that everyone everywhere would know Him for who He truly is. Notice that in v23:

**And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord God,
when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.**

God wants everyone to see the full picture of who He is. And as a result, His aim is that many would turn to worship Him.

Now I wonder what you think about that motivation? Like if I said that was my motivation in being here today, what would you think about me? “Ok, everyone gather round – and praise *me*. You need to see who I am! Because don’t you KNOW who I am?” And instead of a sermon, we just scroll through my Instagram feed and I force you to like my photos. What would you think about me?

It’s interesting, because some people have walked away from God because of this picture. Like God is some kind of egomaniac. Brad Pitt is one of those people. He said he believed in God in high school. But when he heard this stuff, he thought, “It seemed to be about ego. I can’t see God operating from ego, so it made no sense to me.” As a result, we walked away.

But they’ve missed the point. For *me* to say I’m the center of the universe *would* be ego. But for God to say that? That’s actually appropriate. He made the universe. He made us. He rules everything. And He’s the only one who can save and restore His people.

Brad Pitt can say it makes no sense. But here’s what *really* makes no sense: If God said, “I alone created all things, and rule all things, and bring salvation to my people... so... worship someone else!” ... *that* makes no sense.

Rather, listen to these words from Psalm 67:1-4 –

**May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
² that your way may be known on earth,
your saving power among all nations.
³ Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you!
⁴ Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.**

Do you hear that? Praise God for who He is. The gracious one. The one who blesses us. The one who makes His face shine on us. The one who comes

with saving power. Praise Him! Be glad and sing for joy! Because the one you praise rules the earth and judges with fairness and saves his people.

No one else deserve the place that God has!

Which is why the **reason** for restoration is **God's glory**. It's that the Israelites and the nations around would know that He is the LORD. It's that **His** reputation would be restored as He restores His people.

So do you see – when God restores His people, He doesn't want life to just go back to normal. When God saves you, you can't remain the center of your universe. Life now turns around the glory of God. Life is now all about Him and His reputation.

When God brings restoration, life simply can't go back to normal.

Which is exactly what we continue to see in the next section of Ezekiel, v24-30. Here we see the life-transforming **result** of restoration. God restores his people for his name's sake. And that has an incredible **result**.

Turn back to Ezekiel 36 with me. And this is a beautiful section of the Bible. The word grace isn't used here, but it echoes loudly. The word 'gospel' isn't used here, but run your hands over these words and you can feel gospel life.

V24, God says He'll take the Israelites back into the promised land. That itself is gracious promise. But it doesn't solve the problem. What if they go back into the land, and just repeat the same old patterns? God's name will just be brought low again. Things can't go back to normal.

God has to deal with the root of the problem. And what is that?

Well it's not that the Israelites have too little education. *It wouldn't help to send them off to uni for a few years. Nor would it help to change their politics – like, if they could vote for a different party to represent them. Nor would it fix things if they all went to counselling and worked on their mental health, as helpful as that can be.*

No, these things aren't the heart of the problem. **The heart of the problem is the human heart.**

Jesus puts it this way in **Matthew 15:18**.

¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.

What defiles a person? What makes someone unclean and sinful, and in need of restoration? Whatever proceeds from *the heart*. The place of feelings, but in Hebrew thinking, also attitudes and decisions. That is where our sinful rejection of God and sinful treatment of one another comes from.

*And what we see in our hearts – every heart – is a rejection of God. We want to run our own lives our own way, with ourselves at the center of the universe. Or at least anything or anyone other than God. And that's where sin comes from. Our actions emerge from a rebellious heart. **That's the heart of the human problem.***

But now turn back to Ezekiel 36:25, and look at what God promises to do to restore His people...

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.

God promises to CLEANSE the Israelites. He promises to grab the gurney and power-wash the idols and false gods out of their hearts, to fundamentally change their allegiances and desires and attitudes and beliefs. To wash them from the inside out.

How? V26.

²⁶ 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.

We're talking here about a *heart transplant*. Taking out the old, defiled, stubborn rebellious one, and replacing it with a new one. God will replace the heart of stone – stubborn, set in its ways; with the heart of flesh – responsive and warm to God.

He does this by actually breathing *life* into a person. You can see that as He gives not only a new heart, but a new *spirit*.

The word 'breath' and 'spirit' are interchangeable in Hebrew; here, the picture is God REPLACING a dead heart that's stopped beating, and then BREATHING LIFE into someone who's stopped breathing. He brings the dead to life!

Which is exactly the image we get over the chapter, in **chapter 37**. God shows Ezekiel a vision of a valley filled with bones. Skeletons of the dead. And then God breathes life into the bones, and they stand up – and clothed with new bodies, become living, breathing people. They're filled with the breath of God, and they live!

This is the gospel according to Ezekiel! God comes to breathe new life!

And don't miss the point – if someone has received that kind of restoration, **life can't go back to normal.**

This new heart and new spirit in them will mean a totally new pattern of life. Look at v27. I want you to see this. V27 –

And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

This new Spirit in them, the Spirit of God, will actually cause them to obey Him. That's the point. It's not for life to go back to normal. God has breathed new life into them *so that* they'd now be able to grow at obeying him.

See – the **result** of God's restoration is completely life changing. **His people cannot, and will not, go back to normal.** It all starts with God giving this new heart.

And while the Israelites may have experienced this in part, **the fulfilment of this promise is actually for us today.**

Perhaps you're aware of the state of your heart without God's transformation. Perhaps you know both the feeling and the reality of being 'defiled' – dirty in sin. Ashamed of being seen by God and others for who you really are.

Some hundreds of years after Ezekiel was around, there was a church in Corinth filled with people who knew these things.

Listen to what God's word says to this church. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 –

Or do you not know that the unrighteous^[9] will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality,^[10] nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you.

The Corinthians saw themselves in that list. Perhaps you can too. Whether in your past or present. But now hear v11:

¹¹ And such were some of you. 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.

You were *washed*. Washed of your defilement. Cleansed from your sin. You were *sanctified* – made holy in God's sight. You were *justified* – made "just as if I'd" never sinned. Complete restoration!

How? Through the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. Jesus died on the cross, taking the dirt and defilement of our sin on himself. He bore it before God, taking the judgment we deserve.

And if we trust that He's done that for us, we are *washed, sanctified, justified*. Our sin is gone!

And God gives us His *Spirit*. The Holy Spirit comes to live in us, breathing new spiritual life and new desires and new capacity to live God's way, just as God promised through Ezekiel.

This is complete restoration. As another letter to this church puts it, in **2 Corinthians 5:17** –

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. [4] The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

The old heart has gone. God gives us a *new heart* if we are in Christ. It's not something we can do for ourselves, anymore than someone can give themselves heart surgery. This is God's act of restoration through Jesus.

Here's the **result** of restoration – it reaches to the problem in our hearts. God saves us through faith in Jesus, gives us a NEW heart, and puts His Spirit in us... so that we can live a new way.

And if that's happened for someone, **life simply can't return to normal.**

Has this happened for you? Have you turned to Jesus, trusting in His work on the cross, dying and rising again for you? Have you been washed, and sanctified, and justified? Do you know that you have this new heart from God?

How can you know?

Well one answer is by looking at your **response** to restoration. Does life look different since you began to follow Jesus? Or have things just gone back to normal?

Do you keep walking in patterns of sin and rebellion, or do you see new desires and new patterns of living?

These are hard questions. But we have to ask them.

And this is why our passage in Ezekiel ends on a sober note. There's gravity to all this.

Look at v31. After the Israelites return home, with all of God's restoration blessings...:

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.

Look at the attitude to sin God wants them to have. Remember it. Loathe yourselves for what you've done to Him. Don't just go back to normal, repeating the same sinful patterns.

V32:

It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord God; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel.

Can you hear the echoes of what we've encountered in the last couple of weeks? Remember your sin. Be ashamed. And know that it's not because of us and how good we are that God promises restoration. It's for His sake. It's for the sake of His name.

And it's worth asking – *is this your response to God's restoration through Jesus?*

Do you find yourself **confessing** your sin to God? Or do you **ignore** it? Maybe even try to **justify** it? "Oh, well I was angry at her because I'm so tired from work." "I clicked that link because things have just been so stressful lately." "I haven't paid much attention to God because, well, who can find the time?" What's your attitude to sin?

And over time, do you see a change in your attitude and motivations, so that you're wanting to put God at the center of things and not yourself? That you want to see His reputation restored in you and around you?

Do you see change in your life? Do you see the kind of response to restoration that God calls for?

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Look, the wonderful reality is this: If you trust in Jesus, then God remembers your sin no more. He removes it from you as far as the east is from the west. He casts it into the depths of the sea. He remembers your sin no more.

But it's important for us to remember our sin before him. **One sign of true conversion and true restoration, a sign that we really do have a new heart and a new spirit, is that we become more concerned for God's reputation than for our own self-justifying excuses.** We find ourselves running less towards sin, and more towards repentance. Less toward living for ourselves, and more towards living to show God's glory.

Not *to* be saved – but *because* we're saved.

And as we finish our time in the book of Ezekiel, this such an important point to end on. God's restoration, ultimately given in Jesus, is incredibly good news. But Ezekiel doesn't let us off the hook.

Just as we get this picture of restoration, we find the question hitting us again: **Have you *really* been restored? Have you *really* got this new heart? Have you really received God's Spirit? Have you *really* been saved by Jesus?**

Don't **assume** you have. Look for evidence. Look for what kind of **response** you have to God's work of restoration. Not your response 10 years ago, but today.

(NEXT PAGE!)

And so here's a **challenge**, both for me and for you. Take some time this week. I know, everyone's busy. But I guarantee this is the most important thing you can do this week. This is a matter of your soul, and a matter of eternity.

Take some time out of your schedule this week. 20 minutes, half an hour. Find a place where you won't be disturbed. If that's getting up early tomorrow morning, go for it. If that's after dinner tonight, everyone in your household takes this time, then whatever works.

Take that time and sit alone with God. And in his presence, ask yourself these 3 **questions**:

- 1. What do I really believe Jesus has done for me?**
(read back through today's passage if you want)
- 2. How does God really want me to respond?**
- 3. Do I see evidence of that in my life *right now*?**

I hope many of you emerge from that time with great assurance. That'll make the time very worthwhile. And... I know that some of you will emerge from that time with heavy questions. That's good too. That's a sign you're possibly coming out of self-delusion and into seeing God for who He truly is.

But either way, I believe if every one of us took this challenge this week, it could really be the start of something.

Because I want to see revitalisation in this church. Do you? I want to see people wholeheartedly focused on living for the glory of God. On seeing Jesus' reputation upheld in their lives, and Jesus' reputation restored in this community. Do you want to see that? To see people coming in droves to know the saving love of Jesus, and to praise Him because God has restored them to life and given them a new heart?

Revitalisation starts here.

Let's pray.