

Article: You'll Be My People; I'll Be Your God

As we know from the Old Testament, the Israelites often behaved badly. Even though they were set apart to be God's own possession, they would get tied up in worshipping pagan gods. Needless to say, the Lord God would then use neighbouring nations to discipline Israel. At one time, it was the nation of Babylon that disciplined Israel.

Now, during the severe discipline, the Lord God would often speak wonderful Gospel promises to the people of Israel. (And so, do not let anyone try to convince you that the Old Testament is just full of Law and not Gospel.) One such example of the profound Gospel spoken to the people of Israel and Judah is written in Ezekiel 36:22-28. Look up this passage for yourselves, but here it is paraphrased. Listen to what the Lord God promises, "For here's what I'm going to do: I'm going to take you out of these countries, gather you from all over, and bring you back to your own land. I'll pour pure water over you and scrub you clean. I'll give you a new heart, put a new spirit in you. I'll remove the stone heart from your body and replace it with a heart that's God-willed, not self-willed. I'll put my Spirit in you and make it possible for you to do what I tell you and live by my commands. You'll once again live in the land I gave your ancestors. You'll be my people! I'll be your God!"

Now, one thing that is important to notice is this: who is going to do this? Who is going to accomplish all of this? Who is going to make this happen? The nations of Israel and Judah? No! It is the Lord God who will do this. In fact, as you look through this whole section of the Book of Ezekiel, God uses the first person "I" some 34 times to talk about how He is going to deliver them, cleanse them, cause them to walk in His commands, and so forth. And so, make no mistake about it, our Lord God is active, mighty, and powerful to cleanse sins, give new hearts, and transform minds. In fact, when one reads the verses of Ezekiel Chapter 36, it is quite difficult not to see this as a prophecy speaking of New Testament Baptisms.

How so? In Holy Baptism, you are not taken out of Babylon but taken out of the Kingdom of Darkness. Furthermore, in baptism, you are sprinkled clean, given a new heart, and given the Holy Spirit so that you will not be alone but have God. In baptism, you become God's own possession. And like the words from the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, baptism is not your work but the work of God to you and upon you.

There is a problem, though. Every generation tries to dim the Gospel's brightness because it seems too good to be true. Furthermore, one of the fundamental problems within Australian Christianity is that we have this peculiar notion that we are masters and commanders of our spiritual destiny. We hold to the idea that we have a free will. And so, when the Gospel is presented as too bright and too good - when the Gospel is presented as too one-sided, well... we protest. When we hear that the Lord God does all the heavy lifting and leaves nothing for us, we get agitated because that kind of Gospel leaves no room for us to get our foot in the door. It leaves no room for us to participate in our salvation and contribute our best efforts. Perhaps we function this way because a foreign dictator has never ruled us. In other words, it is easy to believe that we can do whatever we want when we want when we've never truly felt what it is like to be trapped under another person's thumb. We've never been deported to a foreign pagan country to live under that country's language, customs, and power. In other words, our nation's spirituality can be quite cocky and arrogant; we tend to show off our so-called free will, as if we have done mighty things before God by our own reason and strength.

But the fact of the matter is this: even though we live with tremendous freedom in Australia - at least for the time being - spiritually speaking, we are no different than Israelites of the Old Testament living under a foreign ruler. For example, apart from the Lord God's intervention in our lives, we are spiritually blind, stumbling in sin within the Kingdom of Darkness. Apart from the Lord God, our hearts are like stone - actually, it is much worse than that - apart from the Lord God, our hearts are in open rebellion against God and His divine statutes. Apart from the Lord God, we cannot and will not believe in God, obey God, or abide in the Lord God, which is the reason why the Lord God has to first act upon you and me.

And so, the point is this, we Christians should be able to say with bold confidence: "If it were not for the Lord God almighty intervening in my life, I would be nothing but a poor miserable damned sinner in the foreign Kingdom of Darkness destined to a hell that I deserve." And we should be able to go on and say, "But the Lord God snatched me from the Kingdom of Darkness, washed me, forgave me of my sins, gave me His Spirit, and made me His own. He had every reason not to do this, yet He did this for me - the chief of sinners. And for that, I am forever grateful. I do not deserve this and certainly cannot take any credit for it. I was dead, but now I am alive. I was blind, but now I see. I was deaf, but now I hear."

But it does not stop there. Since the Lord God not only cleansed you, gave you His Holy Spirit, and delivered holy impulses to you but also caused you to walk in His Word, all the good that you are permitted to give and receive does not belong to your reason or your strength but to the Lord's grace. Never forget that the Lord God has made you holy through His Word and Sacraments and then prepares good works for you to walk in. Indeed, never forget that you abide in Him as His work of art. And so, everything good in your life - the good that you are able to give and receive, the food that you eat, the shelter you rest under, the clothes you wear, and the protection you have are all a sheer gift to you because of the Father's divine goodness.

While there is much that we may have earned in this life - our educational degrees, our salary, our homes, our reputations, our wisdom, our pensions, and so forth - all of this is only possible because the Lord God has been gracious to you and me.

All of this is a sheer gift that we have been given, for if the Lord were to withdraw His gracious hand for even a moment, all would perish – all would fall away.

Indeed, Ezekiel 36:22-28 is profound good news. The Lord God cleanses His people. He removes the heart of stone and gives a heart of flesh. He delivers His Spirit, rescues, and claims, and it is no different for you and me today. Everything that you have been given is a sheer gift, not a reward for your faithfulness, not a prize for your generous disposition, and not a medal for your heroic prayer life. Instead, the Lord God restored you to a right relationship with Him through baptising you into the life, death, and resurrection of His beloved Son because of His rich mercy and abundant grace. This is the Good News of the Gospel that Ezekiel proclaims to you and me this day.