The Lord promises to restore

Text: Ezekiel 34-36

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**Scriptures:** Ezekiel 34-36

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 100b, 51b, 511, 184, 427

Series: Ezekiel (sermon #10)

Theme: For the sake of His holy name, the Lord promises a complete restoration of His chosen people; their leadership, their land and their own hearts.

Proposition: Brothers and sisters, with great humility, know that Christ is your good shepherd, that God has changed your heart and that you belong in God’s bountiful kingdom

**Introduction**

A number of people in this congregation are familiar with house renovations. Some have purchased ‘doer-upper’ houses with a view to converting them into better, more suitable, refurbished homes. Sometimes, with a major renovation project, the task can seem almost overwhelming: with questions like “Where do we even start?” Maybe we’d be better off just hiring a bulldozer and starting again from scratch? Perhaps, like the construction projects in Christchurch after the earthquakes, even the ground upon which structures stand required extra work to provide a strong and stable platform for new buildings.

After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the laying waste of much of the land of Israel, a major renovation project was necessary to restore God’s people to the blessed state which God had promised long before through Abraham: a land filled with many people living securely in peace, harmony and prosperity with their God and with one another. A community for whom God’s promise would be true ‘*you shall be my people, and I will be your God*’ (Eze 36:28).

The remaining chapters of the book of Ezekiel (34-48) unfold God’s plans for a glorious future for His people, whom He promises to restore. This was a message of hope for the exiles who first heard these words, as it is for us also today. We see much of the fulfilment of these ancient prophesies already in the person and work of Christ and we look forward to the future completion of God’s gracious work of renewal when Christ returns. This message is about God’s great restoration project and we’ll look at it under 3 points:

1. A new government
2. A new home
3. A new person
4. **A new government**

We are very much aware of the devastating effects of bad government. Past world history and current events provide many examples of leaders who use their positions of power to oppress the citizens of their countries, amass great wealth for themselves at the expense of others, and do little or nothing to care for the wellbeing of the needy and vulnerable in society. The Indian civil rights activist Mohandas Gandhi famously said in 1931 “A nation’s greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members”. We can estimate the quality of our own civil government by how the weaker members of our country are protected for example, unborn children and the elderly.

We often refer to the leaders of our country as ‘MPs’ (members of Parliament). In the ancient Near East, leaders often had the title ‘Shepherd’. The Babylonian kings Hammurabi and Merodoch-Baladan both described themselves with the word ‘shepherd’, as did the Lord God when he spoke of David’s kingship over Israel: *'You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel*.'" (2 Sam 5:2). To be a shepherd in the ancient Near East was to be a ruler who governed citizens of a nation.

By the time of the prophet Ezekiel the leaders of Israel had formed a very bad government for the people. In our text, the Lord brings judgement upon these leaders via the mouth of His prophet Ezekiel. We can see this in chapter 34 v2-10. Here is a summary of the charges against these wicked leaders:

1. Instead of feeding the sheep, they fed themselves (v2).
2. They used the sheep for their own food and clothing (v3). As someone has said they ‘dined on roast lamb wearing sheepskin coats’. Those they should have protected became their prey.
3. They did not strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, nor bring back the strays, seeking out the lost (v4).
4. Instead they ruled over the sheep with force and harshness (v4).
5. The result of their wicked government was the scattering of the flock which resulted in them becoming food for wild animals (v5).

As a result of their self-centred bad government, the Lord is against these unfaithful rulers and promises to restore faithful leadership, not with mere human rulers, but with by his own actions. He will:

1. Search for His scattered sheep (v11) and rescue them (v12) by seeking the lost, bringing back those who have strayed, binding up the injured, and strengthening the weak (v16).
2. Gather them together and bring them to their own land (v13).
3. Feed them well there (v14).
4. Protect them so that they can lie down in safety (v14).
5. Establish justice and punish the oppressors (v16), including, not only the leaders, but also the stronger members of society who took advantage of the weak; like sheep fouling the water which others must drink (v20), or thrusting the lean sheep away with aggressive horns (v21).

In summary, the Lord Himself would be ‘the shepherd of my sheep’ (v15). The Lord would establish a covenant of peace with His sheep (v25), showering covenant blessings upon them (v26). Instead of famine, plague, drought and sword, there will be peace and prosperity and they will know that the Lord their God is with them (v30).

Jesus Christ, who said “*I am the good shepherd*” (John 10:11) is the fulfilment of the Lord’s promises here of a new government for His people. Jesus is both tough and tender. He courageously laid down His life for His sheep, but also leads them gently with great patience, compassion, kindness and love. He is the faithful leader who protects his sheep and knows each one by name (John 10:1-14), who seeks and saves the lost (Luke 19:10). He is the wise and discerning judge who will separate the sheep from the goats on the final Day of Judgement (Matt 25:32). He rules His body, the church, through means of elders who are called to “*shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock*” (1 Peter 5:2-3).

Men of the congregation, do you aspire to the office of elder which the Scriptures describe as a noble task (1 Tim 3:1). Is it your aim to be used by the Lord to provide good government for God’s people in the covenant community of the church? Will you embark on training towards the goal of serving in this office? Here are some key ways which arise from our text:

1. Spend time with others in the congregation discipling them in the Word, teaching them what you have learned from the Bible.
2. Keep an eye out for those in need in the congregation and reach out to help them.
3. Keep an eye open for those who are on the fringes of congregational life and reach out to them with loving care which seeks to understand the other person so that you can meet their needs.
4. Think about other people you know outside the church and be active in speaking about Christ, your Good Shepherd with them.
5. Be understanding of others, gentle and kind – especially to those in need. Seek to be a person who gathers others into the church, not scatters people away through unwise words or ungodly behaviour.

Through Ezekiel, the Lord promises a new government for His people. The final fulfilment of this will come in the future when Christ returns and God’s renovation project will be complete (e.g. Rev 7:17). Then, brothers and sisters we will see with our eyes, our new home, which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **A new home**

What thoughts come into your mind when you hear the word ‘home’? A familiar place? The place where you belong? Your permanent residence? Somewhere secure and cosy/gezellig? Home can be a wonderful place to be, or it can be result in great pain if your home is not secure, not cosy, if there is conflict in the house, or you are forced to move away. Many in Christchurch were forced to move after the earthquakes; as are 70 million refugees today globally, as the exiles in Babylon who first heard the words of our text were.

We saw last week how those left behind in Israel, who survived the conquest of the Jerusalem, were grabbing land for themselves in the post-war chaos. Israel’s neighbours also looked forward to personal profit when the land was left unguarded. On her eastern border was the land of Edom, inhabited by the descendants of Esau; who had struggled with his twin brother Jacob even before they were born. The Lord said to their mother, Rebekah: "*Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger*." (Gen 25:23) Esau and his descendants, the Edomites, were very much the symbol, image, or archetype for non-elect people. We see this in the book of Romans (9:13) as Paul quotes from Malachi 1.2-3 writing “*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated*”. The history of the struggle between Israel and Edom explains the judgement against ‘Mount Seir’ in chapter 35 (which we didn’t read).

This passage may seem out of place in Ezekiel’s encouraging words of coming restoration, but actually forms the background to God’s promise of a new home for His people. It’s helpful to know that ‘Mount Seir’ is another name for Edom, being the mountainous region on the border with Judah. You may recall that Edom was one of the neighbouring nations upon whom the Lord’s coming judgement was revealed in chapter 25 (12-14).

The message is clear: those that oppose God’s people and rejoice at their downfall will incur the wrath of the Lord in judgement. This was a word of comfort for the exiles in answering the question “who would preserve the promised land, their homeland whilst they were helpless captives?” In chapter 36 the Lord promises to repossess the land for His people. He says that He will bring forth great fruitfulness to the land e.g. v8 "*But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to my people Israel, for they will soon come home*”.

1. “The cities shall be inhabited and the waste places rebuilt” (v10).
2. Man and animals will ‘multiply and be fruitful’ (v11).
3. God’s people will once again walk on the land of promise (v12).

We know that there was a partial fulfilment of these pledges when many Israelites returned home in 538BC with the permission of the Persian ruler Cyrus the Great. The fullness of the promise of a new home for God’s people is yet to come, when this earth will be completely restored (e.g. Rev 21:1-3). Jesus comforts his disciples with this coming reality: "*Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also*” (John 14:1-2).

Did you know that for nearly 80 years the Harvard University study of adult development has analysed the lives of men from a wide range of backgrounds/ Some went onto become successful businessmen, doctors, lawyers, others ended up as schizophrenics or alcoholics. The result of analysing copious quantities of data from this study has resulted in the identification of a single factor which was most significant for a healthy and happy life. It was not wealth, or physical health, or education, or personal achievement. It was the quality of their relationships in community.

What makes home really home? More than familiar furniture, pictures and surroundings, it is family and friends. Times of fun and fellowship with those you love and who love you. Home is the place where you belong and where you are secure.

The new home which God is preparing for His people is a happy, healthy place where there will be perfection relationships between God and mankind and between all those who dwell in that fruitful land of promise. It will be a place where all of God’s people belong – without exception.

Part of our call as a congregation is to labour in the Lord’s strength to make this church a loving home for all who come into our midst so that many are able to find a spiritual home amongst us. This is already happening, but the rebuild is not yet complete. There is more we can do, as the Lord works through us, to change this church into a blessed healthy spiritual home which more and more foreshadows the heavenly Jerusalem yet to come! We can be encouraged to keep renovating this spiritual home in the strength of the Lord by the promise in our 3rd point:

1. **A new person**

The root problem for Israel was not just bad government nor loss of their land to their enemies. These were external out-workings of an internal issue: the inner thoughts and motives of the people themselves which then resulted in their outward behaviours; idolatry, greed, self-centeredness, and a trust in the blessings of the Lord, rather than the Lord himself. In our text, this inner core of the people themselves is described as their ‘heart and spirit’ (36:26). A radical inward renewal was needed.

If the Lord fulfilled his promise of gathering his people from the nations and bringing them back into their own land (36:24), then history would likely repeat itself and their idolatry would continue. Similarly, if you are renovating a house and decide to repaint the walls, preparation is absolutely critical. Putting new paint on dirty surfaces is not going to result in a good result that will last. Likewise, in the spiritual realm, an inner purification of people is a necessary preparation for change. God says through his prophet: “*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*” (Eze 36.25).

The water of baptism symbolizes this inner cleansing. Baptism points to the need for a change which is brought about by the Lord Himself, not by the person being baptised. It is not a declaration that the person being baptised decided to have faith in Christ, but rather an act of faith in the promises of God to cleanse and renew. Just as Abraham knew that an internal circumcision of the heart was needed to change a person, not an external cutting away of flesh, so when we baptize our children or an adult in this church, we know that a baptism of the heart is necessary for salvation.

Neither infant nor adult baptism actually cleanses – rather the sacrament points to the work of God in purifying a person supernaturally. Into the cleansed person, God promises to put a new heart and a new spirit (v26) by implanting the Holy Spirit into them. This is the regeneration, the new birth, the birth from above, which Nicodemus, who would have been familiar with our text, did not seem to comprehend, as Jesus explained to him: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born againhe cannot see the kingdom of God*." (John 3:3) "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*” (John 3:5).

The result of a regenerated inner heart is a desire to be careful to obey God’s law (Eze 36:27). Only those who have been made new people on the inside can be God’s people. These are those for whom the covenant promise of God is true “*you shall be my people and I will be your God*” (36:28). Being a new person, in New Testament language, a ‘new creation in Christ’ (2 Cor 5:17) means that “the old has passed away and the new has come”. Willing obedience to the Lord is now possible and desirable for the new person. There is no better way to live this life; for this is the essence of eternal life, that is being a new creation in Christ.

The unbelieving world constantly teaches that high self-esteem is the goal of all who would be happy and healthy, and that self-loathing is psychologically damaging to the individual. However, the Lord reveals the truth via Ezekiel in 36:31-32, saying that after His people were given new hearts: “*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…. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel*” (Eze 36:31-32)

Brothers and sisters, when we look back on our sins in the distant or near past, with changed hearts we are ashamed. How could I have done such a thing? I could I have spoken that way? I could I have thought so badly of someone else? How could I have failed to give glory to the Lord when He gave me every opportunity? My own personal experience, and that of many brothers and sisters I know well is that as I grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, I do not view myself in a more and more favourable light, but quite the opposite. I am comforted by our text that this is evidence of a changed heart. I hope and pray that the Lord may work more humility in me that I may glorify Him in the future more than I have in the past. How about you?

Why does God promise His covenant people such a complete restoration? Was there something in them that He saw and liked the look of? Was His action grounded in His own mercy and compassion upon these helpless wretches? Our text gives the Lord’s reason for His promised restoration: “*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*”. To our human ears today God’s great concern for his own name and glory may appear uncomfortably self-centred, even offensive. Yet the reality is that the desire for self-glorification is as much a virtue for the Lord as it is a grievous sin for people like you and me. Think about this. For God to seek to glorify anybody or anything less than Himself would be idolatry – just as it is for us to have anybody of anything in our lives of higher priority than the Lord Himself. Glorifying and exalting His own perfect character and reputation is the most fitting task for God Himself and also for all of humanity who are created in His image.

The exile of God’s people in Babylon tainted the Lord’s reputation as the One who had promised them peace and a security in the promised land. Likewise, the closure of churches due to apathy, idolatry, division and a disregard for the glory of the Lord taints His reputation in the world. The foremost importance of God’s holy name is clearly taught by Christ in the beginning words of the model prayer: "*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name*” (Matt 6:9).

Brothers and sisters, with great humility, know that Christ is your Good Shepherd, that God has changed your heart and that you belong in God’s bountiful kingdom. You yourself are part of God’s great restoration project. He has changed you and is changing you for His glory. There is no better reason to live, there is no better transformation. Praise the Lord for His sure promise to restore what has been broken down and to renew this earth and all His people.

AMEN