

EZEKIEL

Hard to Heart

"Bab(ylon) New Heart"

11:14-25

Introduction

Nicodemus came to see Jesus one evening. Their exchange is recorded in the Gospel of John.

John 3:2 [Nicodemus] came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

John 3:3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

John 3:4 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

After Jesus described being born again Nicodemus objected, asking, "How can these things be?"

John 3:10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?"

I've often wondered at Jesus' response. It almost sounds like the Lord was talking down to Nicodemus. But, of course, He wasn't. As "the teacher of Israel," the Lord was astonished that Nicodemus didn't understand Him.

That's because this idea of being born again was not new. It was old - very old. It was Ezekiel-old!

It's basis is in verse nineteen of our text.

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11:14-25

"Bab(ylon) New Heart"

Ezekiel 11:19 Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh,

God promised His people that He would one day “put a new spirit within them.” They would have “a heart of flesh.” It’s the new birth being promised.

I don’t fault Nicodemus. I don’t think I’ve ever totally put this together before and I have the benefit of already being born again. It’s just interesting to realize that every page of Scripture tells the same story of redemption. Jesus is on every page.

The second half of chapter eleven answers Ezekiel’s question from verse thirteen, "Ah, Lord God! Will You make a complete end of the remnant of Israel?"

No, He would not. What follows is the first real promise of restoration in the book - and it’s a doozy!

Ezekiel 11:14 Again the word of the Lord came to me, saying,

I paused on this word “again.” Ezekiel simply meant that the Lord gave him additional information. But it reminded me of how precious is the Word of God and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. How many times every day, if we remain spiritually sensitive, could we say, “again the word of the Lord came to me.” God is constantly giving me perspective, sharing His heart, showing me opportunities. Again and again and again.

Ezekiel 11:15 "Son of man, your brethren, your relatives, your countrymen, and all the house of Israel in its entirety, are those about whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, 'Get far away from the Lord; this land has been given to us as a possession.'

The inhabitants of Jerusalem thought themselves superior to the Jews who had been taken away captive. They acted like they were better off that those carried away were gone.

All I can say is, Wow. We know from the Book of Daniel that the Babylonians carried away the best of the people, in many cases the most spiritual. Yet to comfort themselves those who remained claimed superiority because they were in proximity to the Temple where the Lord's glory was physically present.

It's amazing how much spiritual pride you can muster in the energy of the flesh! If someone I am having a problem with gets sick, then that is God getting his or her attention. If I get sick then it's simply a trial so God can increase my already profound faith!

You need to look at the facts, not your feelings. The Jews remaining in Jerusalem were continuing in idolatry and rebellion. Their physical proximity to the Temple had nothing to do with them spiritually.

Ezekiel 11:16 Therefore say, 'Thus says the Lord God: "Although I have cast them far off among the Gentiles, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet I shall be a little sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone." '

Before we can talk about this verse we need to clean-up its translation. Here is how it reads in the NIV.

Ezekiel 11:16 "Therefore say: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Although I sent them far away among the nations and scattered them among the countries, yet for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone.'

Big difference between "I shall be a little sanctuary for them" and "for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them."

On the basis of the "little sanctuary," the Jews in the Middle Ages called synagogues "little sanctuaries." But clearly God was not talking about a meeting place at all. He would be their sanctuary while they were scattered in all the countries of the world.

Yes, Jerusalem is of critical importance in redemptive history. Yes, the Temple will again play an important role. Still God could tabernacle with

any willing and obedient heart apart from them being in the land with a functioning Temple.

The promise here, for the exiles, is that God would tabernacle among them once He left Jerusalem. Not visibly as He had there in the Holy of Holies, but spiritually to those seeking after Him.

Ezekiel 11:17 Therefore say, 'Thus says the Lord God: "I will gather you from the peoples, assemble you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel." '

We see this as having some immediate fulfillment in the time after the Babylonian captivity when Ezra and Nehemiah led the return to the land. But it is a bigger, broader promise that looks beyond that return and promises the Jews still scattered today that in a future time they will dwell in their land at the very heart of God's kingdom on the earth.

He is the "sovereign Lord." We can trust His providence to accomplish everything He has promised and prophesied.

Ezekiel 11:18 And they will go there, and they will take away all its detestable things and all its abominations from there.

Though still looking to the future, the Lord's comment here reminded everyone of the truth of the moment. Those remaining in Jerusalem could talk all day about how spiritual they were. In fact, they were continuing to worship "detestable things and... abominations."

Look at the facts of a matter - not your feelings.

Ezekiel 11:19 Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh,

Ezekiel's promise refers to the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit in Israel. Before the Church Age the Holy Spirit indwelt select individuals. This was generally a temporary enablement for a special task. However, in the future kingdom the Holy Spirit will indwell all believing Israelites.

In the mean time the church enjoys the spiritual benefit of indwelling that was promised to the Jews. This is, indeed, the Scripture from which Nicodemus ought to have understood the new spiritual birth.

Ezekiel 11:20 that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God.

First God changes you. He gives you a new heart in the new birth and makes you a new creation. Then, and only then, can you walk with Him in ways that are pleasing to Him. Only then can you be in a relationship with Him.

In our Sunday night Cal-TEC a good question was raised about the Law versus grace. Do we still keep the Law, e.g., the ten commandments?

The answer is Yes and No. We are not under obligation to keep the Law but as Christians nine of the ten commandments are restated for us and we are to obey them. The one that isn't is the commandment to keep the Sabbath.

How do we approach keeping the Law? Look at it this way. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Agreed. We must 'keep' that law. How?

If I love my wife, and if I love my brothers and sisters in the Lord, and if I love all those who are lost whom Jesus loves, I won't commit adultery. Love keeps the Law for me as I simply yield to the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Ezekiel 11:21 But as for those whose hearts follow the desire for their detestable things and their abominations, I will recompense their deeds on their own heads," says the Lord God.

The Jews remaining in Jerusalem provide a good example of those who put any faith in external rituals. If you read the Book of Jeremiah you will see that they still went to the Temple and they continued in its rituals. But they also did these other detestable abominations.

Legalism always leads to that kind of double standard.

If you try to keep the Law as a way of salvation you will be judged by it. You're already condemned because you've broken it multiplied times.

Ezekiel 11:22 So the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel was high above them.

Ezekiel 11:23 And the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain, which is on the east side of the city.

For a while the glory of the Lord, His physical presence, has been departing the Temple and the city. He paused for a while to show His reluctance but now He was leaving.

The "mountain" on the "east side of the city" is the Mount of Olives. Thus the glory of the Lord departed from the Mount of Olives.

It is more than symbolic that Jesus, in His resurrection glory, ascended into Heaven from that same spot. He will return at His Second Coming to that same spot.

It was from the Mount of Olives that Jesus pronounced woe upon Jerusalem and the Jews for rejecting His offer to establish the kingdom. He predicted their second destruction.

In Jesus God's glory returned to the earth but He was rejected by the Jews. The glory again departed from them but will return to them.

I ran across an interesting quote by a Jewish rabbi which reads, "Rabbi Jonathan said, Three years and a half the Shekinah stayed upon the Mount of Olives, in the hope that Israel would do penance; but they did none." Rabbi Jonathan wrote commentary in the second century.

It's not biblical but, if it is true, it is interesting when you consider that when Jesus was on earth His ministry lasted three and one-half years before His glory departed back to Heaven.

Mean time His glory resides in His body on the earth, in His church. It isn't visible physically - although it can manifest itself at times. Stephen, the first martyr, gave visible signs of God's glory in him. We are His spiritual glory revealing the Lord by grace.

Ezekiel 11:24 Then the Spirit took me up and brought me in a vision by the Spirit of God into Chaldea, to those in captivity. And the vision that I had seen went up from me.
Ezekiel 11:25 So I spoke to those in captivity of all the things the Lord had shown me.

Ezekiel had been carried away from Babylon to Jerusalem for this vision. He was returned. He shared with the exiles what God had shown him.

One commentary noted,

[Ezekiel] and people of like mind were at the center of God's will even though their circumstances made them seem like castaways and a bunch of nobodies. The leaders of Jerusalem, on the other hand, looked to the casual observer as if they had it made and could expect to enjoy a long and prosperous life in the capital of Judah. In reality, *they were the castaways!* Their days were numbered, and in a few short years the horrible miseries of siege and bloody defeat predicted in chapters 4-7 would come upon them.

Externals tell us nothing. Matthew Henry said, "it is better to be in Babylon under the favor of God than in Jerusalem under His wrath."

As we approach a new year, and our tradition of reviewing and renewing, look below the surface and determine your real heart for God based on what is internal. Your goals should be about being someone, not doing something. The doing will flow from the being.

Be a man, be a woman, after God's own heart. Express the new heart God has given you - the new nature you received when you were born again.

Charles Spurgeon put it this way (and with this we'll close):

The Lord has ways of weaning us from the visible and the tangible, and bringing us to live upon the invisible and the real, in order to prepare us for that next stage, that better life, that higher place, where we shall really deal with eternal things only. God blows out

our candles, and makes us find our light in him, to prepare us for that place in which they need no candle, for the glory of God is their light; and where, strange to tell, they have no temple, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple thereof. The holy leads to the holiest: living upon God here leads to living with God hereafter. Oh, that God would gradually lift us up above all the outward, above all the visible, and bring as more and more into the inward and unseen! If you do not know anything about this, ask the Lord to teach you this riddle; and if you do know it, ask him to keep you to the life and walk of faith, and never may you be tempted to quit it for the way of sight and feeling.

