

Psalm 51:10–12, 17 (NIV)

- ¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
- ¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
- ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
- ¹⁷ My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.

Ezekiel 11:19, 18:31, 36:24-28, 33-36 (CEB)

¹⁹ I will give them a single heart, and I will put a new spirit in them. I will remove the stony hearts from their bodies and give them hearts of flesh.

³¹ Abandon all of your repeated sins. Make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Why should you die, house of Israel?

²⁴ I will take you from the nations, I will gather you from all the countries, and I will bring you to your own fertile land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be cleansed of all your pollution. I will cleanse you of all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove your stony heart from your body and replace it with a living one, ²⁷ and I will give you my spirit so that you may walk according to my regulations and carefully observe my case laws. ²⁸ Then you will live in the land that I gave to your ancestors, you will be my people, and I will be your God.

A new heart, a new Spirit. Are we really ready to accept God's gift?

Take a close look at the above excerpt from Psalm 51. In verse 17, the psalmist writes that the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit. I bet that one gives you pause. I've been writing these studies for more than fifteen years now and I could not begin to count the number of times I've had to confront a phrase or an idea that runs counter to nearly everything the world has sought to teach me. Indeed, when it comes to the Bible, that is pretty much the norm.

Ask yourself . . . have you ever wished that your child's or your sibling's or your friend's spirit would be broken? I doubt it. What could the psalmist mean? And more to the point, what does it mean to us? Surely, by "broken," God can't mean oppressed or dysfunctional or damaged. God is our loving Father and what sort of father would want that for his children.

Still, I've raised three sons and if there is one thing I remember about small children it is that they are a selfish lot. I've yet to meet the two-year old who doesn't think that he or she stands at the very center of the universe. All parents struggle to lead their children away from self-centeredness. I suspect that for many of us, our parents' work is never quite finished. Indeed, the psalmist understands this about himself. By a "broken spirit . . . a broken and contrite heart," the psalmist speaks to simple humility and selflessness, to putting God and others ahead of ourselves.

A new heart?

But how can we come to such humility and selflessness? A new heart . . . that's what we need. But what does a new heart look like? How does it differ from an old heart? We aren't too far past Christmas to remember the 'ole Grinch, the guy with a heart two sizes too small. So small he hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season. He hated it so much that he set out to steal it. Dressing up like Santa as best as he could, he

“enlisted” his dog and set out through the wood. He went to the *Who*-homes and broke into them all. He took the stockings, the presents, all the toys to be found, just as he’d do in each home in *Who*-town. “He slunk to the icebox and took the *Whos*’ feast. He took the *Who*-pudding! He took the roast beast. He cleaned out each icebox as quick as a flash. Why, the Grinch even took their last can of *Who*-hash!”

And when he was done, up the mountain he went, his fur flying, oh yes!, he was surely hell-bent. But Christmas still came and that Grinch was in shock; he heard joyful *Whos* in each city block. They didn’t need presents or all that roast beast, they had something better, a God-centered feast.¹

I imagine that if you asked the Grinch just what a new heart looked like, he’d tell you that he saw one in the town square of *Whoville* as they all gathered to celebrate Christmas despite the Grinch’s best efforts. A new heart puts the interest of others ahead of its own. A new heart is forgiving and generous. A new heart doesn’t insist on returning every slight with a slap. A new heart is humble and compassionate. At the center of this new heart, we’d find Jesus and the rejoicing that is ours when we revel in him. Celebrate! Jesus is Lord! Celebrate!

But speaking only of a new heart can be too limiting. Notice in the Ezekiel passages that it both a new heart *and* a new spirit, which we should take to mean an all-encompassing regeneration, our hearts, mind, will, souls – you name it, all new. So imagine “a new heaven and a new earth” filled with people of new hearts and spirits, ready and anxious to be forgiven by God, ready to simply love one another and to love God. That is the promise, the vision, offered by Ezekiel.

But from where?

But there is an odd thing in the Ezekiel passages. Look again at two simple verses: 11:19 and 18:31:

I will give them a single heart, and I will put a new spirit in them. I will remove the stony hearts from their bodies and give them hearts of flesh (11:19).

Abandon all of your repeated sins. Make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Why should you die, house of Israel? (18:31)

“What gives?” you might ask. On the one hand, 11:19 makes it clear that God will give his people a new heart, but, on the other hand, 18:31 plainly states that God’s people are to make for themselves a new heart and a new spirit. For those of us who like neat and clear answers to our questions, such passages are maddening. We just want a straightforward answer; is it God or is it us? Katheryn Darr helps us with this in her commentary on Ezekiel:

... we perceive in them a kind of paradox—on the one hand, the call for human responsibility, on the other hand, the assertion that God is in complete control and effects all in terms of salvation. This tension is by no means limited to the Ezekiel scroll. To the contrary, it appears both in Paul’s letters and in the Gospels. Paul, for example, feels comfortable in exhorting the Corinthian believers to “clean out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed” (1 Cor 5:7). Why, one wonders, is it necessary to “clean out the old leaven” if one is already unleavened? Or again, Paul can tell the Galatians, “if we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Gal 5:25; “live” and “walk” are essentially synonyms. The Spirit moves us, but at the same time, we must follow the Spirit). The paradox is even clearer in Phil 2:12b–13, where Paul tells his readers to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Of this striking but common Pauline paradox Günther Bornkamm observes:

¹ My deepest apologies to Dr. Seuss. I couldn’t resist! Back in 2009, the entire Advent sermon series was built around the story of the Grinch and his too-small heart.

... each proposition substantiates the other: Because God does everything, you too have everything to do.... The believer's actions derive from God's act, and the decisions taken by obedience from God's antecedent decision for the world in Christ. Thus the two come together in equilibrium: to live on the basis of *grace*, but also to *live* on the basis of grace."

From this perspective, faith is not simply mental assent to doctrine or truth. Rather, it is full participation in the life of God and the church. God's gracious outreach toward the believer and the believer's activity toward God coalesce. Each is integral to the other . . .

The evangelists also know of the paradoxical relationship between divine and human willing and acting. In Luke's presentation of the story of the ministering woman (Luke 7:36–50), for example, Jesus tells the woman that "your sins have been forgiven" (v. 48). But is this forgiveness the *consequence* of her actions (anointing Jesus' feet with tears and expensive perfume, and then kissing and wiping his feet with her hair) or the *cause* of them? The narrator provides no specific clues as to the motivation of the woman's strange actions. Gap-filling sequential readers may identify the woman as one of the sinners whom the narrative has just characterized as "having been baptized with the baptism of John," that is, as having repented (Luke 7:29). But even this only removes the issue by one step. Why have they repented? The paradox of divine and human interaction, gift and call, faith and obedience, belief and duty remains. . . .²

Roger Olsen's *The Mosaic of Christian Belief* is one of my favorite books mainly on the basis of his table of contents.³ The book is organized into fifteen chapters, each one devoted to an "and" of the Christian faith: God is Three *and* One, Jesus is God *and* Man, Salvation is Gift *and* Task. None of the fifteen is expressed as an "OR," all are an "AND."

Our new hearts and new spirits are both a gift and a task. As we saw last week in the story of Jesus and Nicodemus, our re-birth into God's family is all about God's grace and his grace alone. We don't contribute to it or assist in any way. AND . . . living with new hearts is a process by which we come to entrust ourselves wholly and completely to our Savior (i.e., faith), thus making our rescue the beginning of a long journey toward true Christlikeness. Thus, these new hearts of ours must be enacted in how we live.

Time again, across the span of the Bible, the writers express this AND. Genuine faith in Christ must result in new ways of living, which we sometimes call "good works," or, as Paul put it, the "fruit of the Spirit." Indeed, to say that our rebirth in Christ must result in good works makes it seem like a command or instruction, but that isn't going far enough. When we come to faith in Christ, we *will* have real change to show for it, we *will* bear fruit. If you claim to have come to faith in Christ and yet have no fruit, Paul would ask you to reconsider where you have really put your trust.

So embrace and be grateful for the new heart that God had given you, even as you go about the day-today-work of making a new heart for yourself. The two will come together and usher you into a new life, a transformed life, the sort of life that we all seek and that God desires for us.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The discussion questions for this series are drawn from the curriculum for our Connection Groups, which will be meeting throughout the series. The questions were written by Rev. Allison Jean.

1. Do you find that you struggle to fully accept God's forgiveness? Why or why not? How does our acceptance of God's forgiveness impact our faith and lives?

² Darr, K. P. (1994–2004). The Book of Ezekiel. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 6, pp. 1496–1497). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

³ Weird, yes, but I've learned that coming the embrace the numerous AND's of th Good News is very helpful in clearing out questions that seem to block us from the faith we seek.

2. How do you respond to the idea that forgiveness is only one of the components of our relationship with God? In what other ways, besides forgiveness, have you experienced God's love?
3. How do you respond to the idea that distraction is the greatest challenge to spiritual growth? When have you felt distracted from your faith? How do you try to prevent this?
4. How do you respond to the idea that God is not just giving us a new heart, but a new soul, will and mind? How have you experienced new life in all of these areas?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: *More on new hearts*

Monday, Matthew 5:1-10 A portrait of a new heart and spirit

Tuesday, Romans 2:14-15 There are Gentiles who carry God's teaching on their hearts even though they have never been given the Law.

Wednesday, 2 Corinthians 3:1-7 Writing on tablets of human hearts

Thursday, Philippians 2:1-11 Having the same mindset as in Jesus

Friday, Philippians 2:12-18 Working out our salvation; doing everything without grumbling

Saturday, Hebrews 10:15-16 The writer reminds his readers of the promise from Jeremiah 31.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the gospel of John.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Samuel.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *Rescue: Images of Salvation*