

HOPE FOR THE FALLEN

Ezekiel 36

The people of Israel have been sent into exile – and sent into exile because everything you think you could do against God’s name...they were doing. All the ceremonial cleansing laws were tossed aside, all the food preparation laws were scrapped, people lived and fought on their own accords, nobody sought the Lord, neighbors were taking other neighbors spouse (**Eze 33:23-26**) – detestable things were happening in the Temple of the Lord – idol worship was rampant and nothing good had become of God’s people as well as the land they were living in. And all the places they went – they spoke poorly of God.

The people simply didn’t care.

And this becomes abundantly clear when God keeps sending prophet after prophet to warn, lead, guide, restore, and bring hope to the people – and their responses varied to those prophets. Some got stoned, some were driven out, but most ignored their words. The people, God’s chosen Covenantal and protected people, the people he loved, guided, had compassion on, made his name upon, defended, and fought for – these people had become like the nations around them. People who worshipped idols and self. People who lived by their own rules and did whatever they pleased.

So he casts them out. He allows those lives that they are choosing to live to become their reality. And we need to remember that this was not something that was suddenly done against them. God was more than acutely aware of what was happening. But time after time, prophet after prophet, king after king...everything kept getting worse. There were kings that would be good – but only while they reigned. Then their son would take over and be it 3 months or 40 years...every step forward led to 10 steps back. So by now, with Ezekiel as the prophet – Judah has gone through 20 kings and that’s not counting Solomon, David, and Saul. And God has sent 7 other prophets (not counting Ezekiel) to Judah alone – and there still will be 4 more to come over the next 150 years. You can’t say God isn’t trying here!

There’s an old saying that it takes “two to tango” – and while true when it comes to not only tango but many things in life, it is NOT true here. God did not abandon this relationship. God did not send idols to tempt them and see what they would do. God didn’t put things before his people in hopes of ruining them – those were all the things THEY had done to themselves. And while yes it would be God who sends them into exile...it is also only God who brings them restoration.

But there’s a rub here in restoration...an uncomfortableness that is subtle but speaks of more uncomfortableness people have with God – believers and non. When we read Ezekiel 36, while

we see this hope and joy and gladness for what God is doing in restoring the people – never do we see it being done for *their* sake. God...does it for him. For HIS namesake.

We read that the “zeal” of God in verse 5 is coming because God had HIS land taken away and abused. And then in verse 22 we read that he doesn’t restore his people for *them*, that it is not for *their* sake that he does this – but for his own. That he does this so that the unholy nations that surround and enslaved them would know that *he is Lord*. Again – all of this...for *him*.

How does that sound...and feel? We like to think that it’s God’s love for his people...that it’s God’s passion and faithfulness of his people to be restored to what they once were as the reason why he moves and restores...but we simply don’t see that – nor is it true. And if we’re honest – some of us may be uncomfortable with God working this way. And I know it’s not only here that bothers people. Other places in scripture where we see the way women were treated and abused, men – women – and children killed... how does a God of “love” do that? How does he allow that to happen? Why does he WILL it to take place?

We have an image of God that we want...and many times what we read doesn’t necessarily fit into that image of ours. We want a God who loves like we love and yet loves so much more, forgives bigger and beyond anything or any way that we can ever forgive – and God is absolutely those things and so much more but God doesn’t play by *our* rules – and that’s a tough pill to swallow in some cases. We need to always remember that God can do anything he wants to do...that’s why he’s “God.” It’s that whole understanding of **Jeremiah 29:11** – that *God* has plans for you. Not *your* plans...HIS plans for you – right? He works the way he works, saves the way he saves, bestows grace upon those the way he bestows grace – by his own rules and plans – not mine or yours or anyone else’s.

I think often times we find ourselves wanting God to be more “like me.” But that is where we start to run into problems with scripture. Never are we to shove scripture into the box I want it to be in. The words in the Bible are the words of the Bible. We cannot cut and paste and rearrange or ignore those things that make us uncomfortable. My feelings...cannot be inserted into the text. It doesn’t work that way. When these words were received by these people in exile where they wondering how Kelly Vander Woude would feel over a thousand years? No. These words are *to* the people who were in exile and were wanting, needing, the One and only Living God to redeem, restore, and set *them* free by any way he deemed necessary. Because they are HIS people. This IS HIS land. It is HIS NAME they defile. It was HIS ways they broke – not theirs, not mine...not yours.

One thing I've realized as I blog through the Psalms is that even when I am extremely uncomfortable with a text, or have no clue why David or another psalmist responds the way that they do and uses the words they use, I'm having to check myself and remember that the psalms

reflect and honest relationship with God – THEIR relationship. That it may feel wrong to me, that maybe I find that I can't understand or believe why someone would do what they did... but that text wasn't written about me or my feelings. The bible is not about me – or you. It's about God.

And really – we need to see all of scripture as a whole...not just one part. And the whole thing speaks of love.

But what often happens when we read texts that we don't necessarily like is then people start to question God and his nature. *"I thought God was love? To me this sounds like an egotistical deity that only acts to save their own name! I can't believe in that!"* And there lies the problem. For us it's one or the other. For us a *loving* God cannot be a *condemning* God – and a *condemning* God cannot be a *loving* God. But it appears that way to us because that's the way we work and think but it is inaccurate for us to push our thoughts and ideas upon God. So for anyone to say that God cannot be love AND _____ is simply wrong. BUT...we also need to understand that we can't say that God didn't do this *because* of love either. He absolutely restores Israel because of love – and he absolutely restored you and I because of love! We cannot separate love from any of God's actions - because they're all based on, and in, "love". Because God IS love.

Love is what sent Christ to the cross. Love is what died upon the cross for yours and my sins. Love is what comes down through the baptism of water that made this invisible and beautiful and amazing sign and act upon Peter's life. Love is what gives the Israelites, even after all this time of pushing God away, a second...third...fourth chance. Love is what gives you a second...third...fourth chance. When Peter comes to Jesus and asks how often should he forgive (**Matthew 18:21-35**) – Christ's words of 77 times doesn't actually mean only 77 times – it actually means UNLIMITED times – Christ's answer was not just something he spits out in passing...but an answer that comes at the core of who he is and what he continuously does for us.

Unlimited forgiveness is born out of love.

And we see this when we get to verse 24 and beyond in our text. God's promise to take them, gather them, cleanse them, and place his Spirit within them and remove their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh – love does that. And when we remember that we cannot separate God's love from who he is, and when we read the text through this understanding OF love and set aside our "feelings" – we actually discover the hope of Christ in the text and this act of love in the restoration of God's people.

We have to be ok with not knowing why God does what he does. Why he chooses to forgive and move and restore the way he decides to do it – and ultimately we have to realize that all those

decisions cannot be separated or pulled apart from the God of love that we know. Simply because it makes me uncomfortable or I don't understand it yet doesn't mean it's not based on and in love. And that is where we find peace in those uncomfortable texts.

And this is where we find peace in our text today too.

When God speaks of giving them a new heart and cleansing them from their idolatries in verse 26 it's a foreshadowing of the new covenant that **Jeremiah** speaks of (**3:31-34**). A new covenant that was not like the one of the ancestors – but one that speaks of the one true shepherd – Jesus Christ. A covenant based on grace, love, and God's active work in the lives of his people. And again, not because they deserved it, Christ doesn't get sent because they deserved it or you deserved it – nor does the Spirit of God come and work in our lives because we've earned it either...but because of God's grace. The words of Ezekiel, the actions of God here are to a battered and hopeless remnant people that had all but given up hope – but what we realize is that even in the midst of hopelessness God speaks and works. That the failures of a people will not push away God's love. And if a people long ago who were so focused on self can be given grace and restoration, love and hope...we need to see that that is given to us too.

And really, if you really think about it – God's grace and love should make you uncomfortable too.