

“New Heart”

Psalm 51:10–12, 17; Ezekiel 11:19, 18:31, 36:24-28, 33-36;

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

Take a close look at the 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 two daughters 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 (*My deepest apologies to Dr. Seuss!*)

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 is 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?

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:

...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. . . .¹

Roger Olsen’s *The Mosaic of Christian Belief* is one of my favorite books mainly on the basis of his table of contents. 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-to-day 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.

¹ 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