

A Heart of Flesh for a Heart of Stone

by Richard E. Bieber

The sermon emphasizes God's promise to replace our hardened hearts with tender hearts of flesh, enabling us to experience His mercy and extend it to others.

Scripture: Psalm 51:10, Isaiah 1:18, Ezekiel 36:22, John 3:3, 2 Corinthians 5:17

Topics: "Heart Transformation", "Spiritual Renewal"

Description

Richard E. Bieber preaches on God's promise in Ezekiel to give His people a new heart and a new spirit, replacing their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh, tender towards God and merciful towards others. This prophecy unfolds as God brings His scattered people back, cleanses them, and fills them with His Spirit, leading to repentance and a deep desire for God. The transformation from a hard heart to a tender heart is a work only God can do, as believers yield to Him and allow Him to remove the hardness within them, bringing about a heart that reflects His mercy and love.

Transcript

Therefore say to the house of Israel, "Thus says the Lord God: 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. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations will know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.

For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God." Ezekiel 36:22-28 In this beautiful prophecy which God gives to His people in Ezekiel, we see God taking a people who have gone astray and for no other reason than His sheer goodness bringing them back home. Why should He bother? Haven't they gone wrong again and again and again? Haven't they profaned His name among the nations? Why doesn't He let them go to hell and start with somebody decent?

But God, praise His name, is not like we are. At a particular moment in time this prophecy begins to unfold, in fact, it has already begun. And for reasons that they themselves cannot understand, these people who are scattered all over the world and have gone astray, and have profaned His name, these people who have rebelled and stiffened their necks against Him time and time and time again begin to hear a call in their hearts to come home. They've had enough of wandering, enough of riches and prosperity, enough of prison and death, enough of tragedy.

Home they go. But even when they're on the land they still don't understand what's going on. Somebody says, "God brought you back", and they say, "Don't be ridiculous! We brought ourselves back. We did this! We chose to come and we sweat and strove and worked and ran risks and suffered in order to get here. It was our doing!" And again we're inclined to say, "Well why doesn't God just strike them down right there, show them who's boss?" But God is merciful. Then the next phase begins to unfold, (this has not happened yet, but it will soon), when the Spirit of the living God begins to sweep over the land of Israel.

By the tens of thousands these people fall on their faces in repentance for their hardness of heart. And they begin to call upon the name of God, and upon the name of His Messiah, and they are washed clean. This is followed by even a more wonderful miracle when the living God begins to give to these people a new heart. He takes out of their flesh these hearts of stone and puts inside them, for the first time in their life as a people a heart that is truly tender toward God, and truly merciful toward their fellow man.

Now the proof that this promise in Ezekiel is valid and that God is going to fulfill it, is that this promise is already being fulfilled in the life of a people who have been ordained by God to carry the redemptive light through this long season of Israelis' slumber. A people made up of Jew, Arab, black, white, every tongue, every nation, every kindred on earth: the Body of Christ where the wall of partition has truly come down. This people has no geographically defined land, and their Jerusalem can be found in any city or village on earth, and now at the hour in which you and I live they are being brought home and they are being washed clean and they are being given a heart of flesh in place of a heart of stone.

This is happening now. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. A new heart and a new spirit. You can't put the Spirit of God in a heart of stone. The order has to be the new heart first. And when the new heart is there then the new Spirit will come. If we concentrate on trying to put the Spirit in hearts of stone we end up with monstrosities. First comes the new heart.

Now people say, "But didn't this happen at the moment when we were reborn?" And the answer, of course, has to be, that it began then, indeed. Surely that was the beginning of the Lord giving us a new heart and a new spirit but, what are you going to do about the person who has been reborn and yet in spite of the fact that they seem to be constantly feeding on the word and constantly praying, they manifest a heart of stone. This person could well be me, or perhaps you. So that we have a heart that is hard against the constant merciful influence of God's Spirit, and a heart that is indifferent to the needy ones around us.

When we have a hard heart we're often not aware of it. Scrooge didn't think he had a hard heart when he refused to let Cratchet put more coal on the fire. He just thought he was a sensible man. Likewise, we don't think of ourselves as having hard hearts. God gives us a promise, a beautiful promise, but we refuse to take hold of it. "Lord, that's my weak faith," we plead. But God says, "Your weak faith, my child is your hard heart." When we're scanning the horizon with a critical eye, seeing everything that's wrong with

"those people", we don't think of ourselves as critical. Oh no, we're simply being discerning.

But God sees a hard heart. To the extent that we still have that rock within instead of a tender heart, we prevent ourselves from receiving the full benefit of God's mercy. This shows itself in many ways. For instance; A hard heart will distort my judgment so that I may think that I size up a situation with great perception but the truth of the matter is I have it all warped and twisted. My cynical eye sees friends as enemies. And when people come to me with innocent questions, I see them as threats.

A hard heart will blind my vision to all the wonderful things that God is doing all around me. The Lord is healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind, delivering people from their bondage and giving them a new start, but all I see is trouble. Satan comes up to me and he offers me a half-truth, and I grab it with thanksgiving as if it's a revelation from heaven. A hard heart dulls my ears so I can't hear. Remember the time when Jesus was approaching His crucifixion in John 12, He said, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified.

What shall I say, 'Father, save me from this hour.' But for this cause came I to this hour. Father glorify thy name." And a voice came back from God the Father, "I have glorified it and I will glorify it." And people standing around said, "Oh, it thundered." And some others said, "An angel spoke." And you could almost see the condition of the heart by what they heard. We hear the voice of God so many times and we say, "It thundered." Or, "That was static on the radio," or "That's the voice of an idiot," because our hearts are hard.

Another sign of the hard heart is that we just don't seem to have communication with God or man. Heaven is as brass, no flow going back and forth between myself and heaven, nor is there any flow going between myself and my fellow man. How is it that people misunderstand what I say? How come I don't seem to be understanding what they're saying? It's my hard heart. I'm not listening. A hard heart never listens. It only hears what it wants to hear. It picks out of things that people say just what it wants and leaves the rest.

So, what is a hard heart? Very simple: A hard heart is a will that has stiffened itself against the mercy of God. God speaks to me with such goodness and such love and such kindness and I just harden myself against his words. I shut the door. We do this repeatedly. And we keep doing until finally the heart has petrified. And the only cure is that it has to be replaced with a heart of flesh. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

Obviously this happens to us at Calvary as the blood of the Lamb begins to dissolve this heart of stone and give me a new heart. He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, The chastisement of our peace was upon him, And with his stripes we are healed. And that healing extends to our very body, mind, and spirit, but it begins with new heart. To the extent that I still have inside myself heart of stone, I must conclude that the work of Calvary which was finished 2000 years ago outside Jerusalem is still not finished in me.

And the same God who sent His Son to die out of sheer mercy, and the same God who caused us to come under the hearing of that gracious gospel and opened our eyes to the reality of Calvary is now bringing this thing to fulfillment in us. He's doing it out of love. He's doing it out of sheer mercy, right now, all over the earth. Wherever people are opening their hearts and receiving what God has to give, He is completing the work of exchanging the heart stone for a heart of flesh in us.

It's happening everywhere. Do we understand what is going on right now? Are we fully aware of what God is doing in the Body of Christ across the earth? Do we understand that what He's doing is His doing and not ours? Do we realize what He's taking us out of? What He's bringing us into? Everything that's going on here that's any good, and everything that's going on in our personal lives which are, most of them going through all kinds of boiling turmoil, (they're very few, if it were known, who aren't going through rough circumstances of one kind or another or inward confusion), is to bring us to the place where we allow God, through His Son, to get what's left of that heart of stone out of us, and give us a heart of flesh.

The heart of stone we understand. Do we understand what it is to have a heart of flesh? Two simple things: - A heart of flesh is a heart that is tender toward God. - A heart that is merciful toward its fellow human. God is giving to us, as a gift not something we earn, (and it's the most wonderful gift we'll ever have), a heart that is tender toward Him. We're not born with a heart that is tender toward God and you can't get a heart tender toward God by going through some spiritual "program".

It has to come from Him. And He's doing it among us and among believers all over the earth right now by the hundreds, by the thousands, wherever people yield in the slightest way, wherever they are willing to open the door and not stiffen themselves, God is doing this. And the result of it is that we begin to have a thirst for God we never experienced before. A yearning for Him, a longing for Him, a desire for Him, a love of Him. When thou saidst unto me, Seek ye my face, my heart said unto thee, thy face Lord will I seek.

When George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement, would come back from a trip around England, he would describe the response of people in terms of whether or not they showed tender hearts toward God. "Their hearts were very tender," he would say. "They were very tender towards the Word." By this he meant he could see the operation of God's Spirit moving on them. And when your heart or my heart becomes tender toward God we begin to find ourselves desiring His words like we never did before, and opening up in prayer like we never could before.

Prayer becomes essential. No longer a drudgery but a longing, a thirsting, that we never seem to get enough of. It's our life. It's almost as if there's an "epidemic" of healing going on, in which God is giving His people who are willing, hearts that are tender toward Himself. May all of us be included. Secondly, God is giving to us, as a gift, not something we earn, a heart that is merciful toward our neighbor. Merciful! Now we know all too well that the nature of our heart of stone was the opposite: it could not be merciful.

But the heart of flesh can. Suddenly we begin to see that that grudge that we've been holding all these years belongs to the heart of stone; it has no place in me anymore. We get rid of it. I begin then to take the words of Jesus to myself,

"Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

The heart of stone cannot receive that word from the Lord into itself. We can get it into our heads, and we can talk to others about it. We can ram it down their throats, we can teach it, we can write books about it, but we cannot live it.

Every word that Jesus speaks concerning mercy becomes like the spring rain on the earth, refreshing us, and renewing us. We desire it, we long for it, we can't get enough of it. And then we begin to find ourselves

as the nature of the new heart God gave us, responding to people who do us evil. Instead of cursing them under our breath, or threatening them out loud, we begin to pray God's richest blessing on them. And instead of coming back to destroy or hurt them, we begin to do them good, and it becomes our nature to do this. Our one desire is to conform to the mercy of God what has come to us. We begin to edify and to build. And instead of criticizing everything we see, we begin to speak and act in order to build up and strengthen and encourage. And even at those times, (and they do come), when we have to say no to people, or when we have to come down with hard words, behind it all still remains a heart of mercy. If you don't do it out of a heart of mercy it's not going to do anything but harm, it's not going to bring anything but death.

Somebody asks, "Are you saying that all of this is the work of God and that we have nothing to do with it at all?" While there is coming a time, very soon, when we will be doing things that we've never done before, the exchange of the heart of mercy for the heart of stone is a thing which only God can do. The only thing we can do is get out of His way, cooperate with Him, yield to Him, conform to Him, and just let Him reach down with His merciful hand and pull out the rock and give us the heart of flesh and fill it with His Spirit. Everybody reading these words, who desires this may receive it now. Or if you had it once and lost it, it can be renewed to you if this is what your desire is. God is speaking to each of us now according to our desire.

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