

September 24
Lesson 4 (NIV)

SPIRIT-FILLED HEART

DEVOTIONAL READING: Isaiah 43:14-21

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 36, 37; Titus 3:1-11

EZEKIEL 36:22-32

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“Therefore say to the Israelites, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. ²³ I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.

²⁴ “For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. ²⁸ Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God. ²⁹ I will save you from all your uncleanness. I will call for the grain and make it plentiful and will not bring famine upon you. ³⁰ I will increase the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field, so that you will no longer suffer disgrace among the nations because of famine. ³¹ Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices. ³² I want you to know that I am not doing this for your sake, declares the Sovereign LORD. Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, people of Israel!”

KEY VERSE

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.—Ezekiel 36:26

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Ezekiel's message of hope for the exiles in Babylon.
2. Explain how feeling shame for one's sins can help the forgiven to lead lives of purity.
3. Identify one improvement to be made that will better exemplify the presence of God's indwelling Spirit in his or her life and make a plan for change.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. It Just Sounds Better
- B. Lesson Background

I. Holy Name (EZEKIEL 36:22-24)

- A. Profaned (v. 22)
 - B. Sanctified (vv. 23, 24)
- Sanctifying His Name*

II. Holy People (EZEKIEL 36:25-27)

- A. From Filthy to Clean (v. 25)
- B. From Stone to Flesh (v. 26)
- C. From Disobedience to Obedience (v. 27)

III. Fertile Land (EZEKIEL 36:28-30)

- A. Land of Fathers (v. 28)
- B. Absence of Famine (vv. 29, 30)

IV. Repentant People (EZEKIEL 36:31, 32)

- A. Ashamed (v. 31)
- Loathing . . . What?*
- B. Confounded (v. 32)

Conclusion

- A. Learning to Blush
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. It Just Sounds Better

Some words and phrases are meant to hinder communication. It is not uncommon for those in government or business to use euphemisms—nice-sounding words or phrases instead of their less attractive counterparts. Such a practice is so common that we may barely notice. We understand that a “previously acquired vehicle” is really just a used car. Those who are “economically disadvantaged” live in poverty. To end up in “correctional custody” is to be in prison.

Some euphemisms are more insidious than others. Admitting that a military attack resulted in “collateral damage” obscures the fact that innocent civilians died. A politician who “committed terminological inexactitude” has lied. And cries for “equal rights” may in some (but not all) circumstances be code words for an attempt to legalize immoral behavior.

Sadly, experience has taught us not to take people at face value. Too often people conduct themselves with hidden agendas as they hide behind obscure communication. But God is very clear about wanting new hearts in his people.

B. Lesson Background

Ezekiel prophesied from Babylon, where he had been taken captive along with the king of Judah and 10,000 others in 597 BC (2 Kings 24:12-14). In the fifth year of their captivity (592 BC), the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel, and his prophetic ministry began (Ezekiel 1:3).

Ezekiel was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah. Both prophesied the end of the nation of Judah. Jerusalem would be destroyed and the temple defiled. Jeremiah preached this message in Jerusalem, where he was in danger of being executed for treason. But Jeremiah persisted and even wrote a letter to the exiles in Babylon, telling them to prepare for a lengthy captivity (Jeremiah 29:1-23).

Ezekiel echoed the same message while in Babylon. As a captive himself, he encouraged his fellow Israelites not to believe the false rumors of an early return from exile. The first 30 chapters of the book that bears his name predict the dire consequences of sin on Judah and surrounding nations.

Word came of the prophecy's fulfillment—Jerusalem had indeed fallen (Ezekiel 33:21). From that point on, the prophet's tone became softer, more comforting. He provided a foundation for faith and hope. Though the city had fallen, God had not forgotten his people. Relief would come.

I. Holy Name

(EZEKIEL 36:22-24)

A. Profaned (v. 22)

22. “Therefore say to the Israelites, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone.

The phrase *people of Israel* refers to Ezekiel’s fellow exiles in Babylon (see the Lesson Background). It is to them that the current message from *the Sovereign Lord* is directed.

In the time between the arrival of news that Jerusalem had fallen and the declarations that begin in the verse before us, the Lord makes about three dozen pronouncements regarding actions he intends to implement personally. Slightly more than half are statements of positive intent regarding the future status of his true “sheep” (example: [Ezekiel 34:11](#)), elsewhere referred to as “a remnant” (example: [Ezra 9:8](#)). The statements of negative intent are directed against various groups that oppress and/or mislead his sheep.

HOW TO SAY IT

Assyria Uh-sear-ee-uh.

Babylon Bab-uh-lun.

Babylonian Bab-ih-low-nee-un.

Canaan Kay-nun.

Ezekiel Ee-zeek-ee-ul or Ee-zeek-yul.

Gentiles Jen-tiles.

Judeans Joo-dee-unz.

Leviticus Leh-vit-ih-kus.

But God will not take the positive actions because the people are righteous or entitled to such a blessing. Quite the contrary! As Joshua led Israel into the promised land some eight centuries before, God had already warned the Israelites not to defile themselves and the land by imitating the religious practices of the previous inhabitants. To do so would result in removal from the land ([Leviticus 18:24-30](#)).

That is exactly what had happened, however. As a result, the people earned God’s judgment and were driven from the land into exile. Israel, the northern kingdom, was conquered by Assyria in 722 BC. Judah, the southern kingdom, was taken to Babylon in a series of deportations that began in about 605 BC.

So Ezekiel speaks to people who are guilty of defiling their land. They have received God’s just judgment. But the Babylonians, with very few exceptions ([Jeremiah 40:1-3](#)), do not see it that way. They see a people conquered by their own armies and gods. This is one way the Israelites have profaned God’s name, since it allows the Babylonians to see him as inferior to worthless idols.

God will not tolerate this forever. So for *the sake of [his] holy name*, he will show himself greater than the gods of Babylon (compare [Exodus 12:12](#)).

B. Sanctified (vv. 23, 24)

23. “I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.

The solution to (or prevention of) the profaning of God’s name is to make it holy—to sanctify it. The pagan Gentiles (*the nations*) believe their gods to be greater than the Lord; they think this has been proven because they have taken the Lord’s people captive. But the Lord will do something that will reverse such thinking. Exactly what that will be is the subject of the next verse.

Before we go there, however, we should consider the designation *the Sovereign LORD*. The prefaces to many editions of the Bible explain that the English rendering *LORD* with capital letters indicates that the divine name YHWH is being translated. By comparison, the rendering *Lord* with small letters indicates translation of a different word. When the two Hebrew words are adjacent (as they are about 300 times in the Old Testament) the translation in the *New International Version* is *the Sovereign LORD*, as we see here.

SANCTIFYING HIS NAME

Jewish people of biblical times grew into the practice of not vocalizing God’s name. They didn’t want to be guilty of speaking it lightly or irreverently. How different from today, when many people use his name merely as a filler expression! Some try to avoid a problem by substituting words such as *golly*, *gosh*, or *gee* in place of the holy names of God and Jesus.

One wonders if misuse of God’s name is tied somehow to the larger issue of religious terminology as used in profane or even just flippant ways. The Bible words *hell* and *holy* seem to be particular favorites in this regard. Is a person who unthinkingly exclaims “Holy cow!” thereby more prone to misuse God’s name as well?

Perhaps the old axiom “when in doubt, throw it out” will serve us well here. Rather than seeing how close we can get to a fire without being burned, we are better served by keeping our distance. But beware: attempts to change speech patterns by mere force of will won’t work since unholy utterances spring from an unholy heart ([Matthew 15:8, 18](#)).

—C. R. B.

24. “For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land.

The most obvious defeat of the fictitious gods of the Gentiles will be in the return of God’s people to their homeland. The defeat of God’s people and their

deportation to Babylon has created the impression that the Babylonian gods are greater than the Lord; that defeat has caused his name to be profaned. The Lord's reversing of that condition will prove he is, after all, superior to them; his name will be sanctified (compare [Exodus 12:12](#)). God's sanctifying of his name and his holiness is connected with correcting misperceptions of *the nations* in several places in this book (see [Ezekiel 20:9, 14, 22, 41; 37:28; 39:7, 21, 23](#)).

What Do You Think?

How might God act to exalt His name today in spite of unfaithfulness?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding contexts within the church
- Regarding contexts outside the church

II. Holy People

([EZEKIEL 36:25-27](#))

A. From Filthy to Clean ([v. 25](#))

25. “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.

Not only will the people be returned to their homeland, they also will be cleansed or purified. To *sprinkle clean water* on people is the language of ritual purification ([Leviticus 14:1-7, 49-52; Numbers 8:5-7; 19:11-13, 16-20](#); compare [Hebrews 10:22](#)). This is more than ritual, however. The cleansing from idolatry will be effective; after the exile, Judah will never again be led into the worship of idols. Some students think the reference to water in this verse and to spirit in the next verse form the background of Jesus' statement in [John 3:5](#).

What Do You Think?

What idols do people worship today? How do we get people to see their error?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding the idols of those who make no pretense of faith in God
- Regarding the idols of those who divide allegiance between God and something else

B. From Stone to Flesh ([v. 26](#))

26. “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

Dr. Christiaan Barnard is credited with performing the first successful human heart transplant (December 3, 1967). But centuries before, God promises not only *a new heart* for the exiles of Judah, but also *a new spirit* (compare [Ezekiel 18:31](#)). In many texts, the words *spirit* (or *Spirit*) and *flesh* signify different spheres that may be opposed to one another (examples: [John 3:6; Romans 7; Galatians 5](#)). But here God's promise of a new spirit goes hand in hand with the promise of a new *heart of flesh* for the people. Their old hearts of stone ([Ezekiel 11:19](#)) must be replaced.

No mention is made of the old spirit in the people, but it must be a mind-set that is opposed to God and his will. Another prophet speaks of “a spirit of prostitution” in describing fascination with idolatry ([Hosea 4:12; 5:4](#)). The people's spirit of rebellion needs to be replaced (next verse).

C. From Disobedience to Obedience ([v. 27](#))

27. “And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

[Ezekiel 11:19](#), mentioned above, was the first time the prophet relayed God's promise of a new heart and a new spirit for the people. That was spoken a few years before Jerusalem had fallen. At that time the people still there were saying that the exiles were separated from the Lord, but they themselves were not. They were claiming that God had disinherited the Judeans taken into exile, and ownership of the land belonged to those in Jerusalem ([11:15](#)). This thinking amounted to casting all blame onto those already in captivity and claiming God's favor for themselves.

But that is not God's point of view! Those who had been deported to Babylon earlier had actually found “sanctuary” ([Ezekiel 11:16](#)). God intends to return the exiles to Judah as he puts a new heart and new spirit in them at that time ([11:17-20](#)). The obstinate and unrepentant people who were not taken in an earlier deportation ultimately suffer the greater punishment ([2 Kings 25:1-21; 2 Chronicles 36:15-20](#)). The message in the verse before us, coming after the fall of Jerusalem, is a reminder of the earlier promise. The city's fall is not cause for despair; rather, it is evidence that the promise in [Ezekiel 11](#) is still valid. With the spirit of rebellion removed and a new spirit from the Lord implanted, the people will indeed turn from their former disobedience.

What Do You Think?

What are some proper and improper ways to help fellow Christians exhibit behavior that conforms to the expectations of the Holy Spirit, who lives within us?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In light of “don't judge” passages such as [Matthew 7:1-5; Luke 6:37, 41, 42; John 8:7](#); and [James 4:11, 12](#)
- In light of “do judge” passages such as [Matthew 7:15-20; Luke 6:43-45; 1 Corinthians 5:12, 13](#); and [1 John 4:1-3](#)

III. Fertile Land

([EZEKIEL 36:28-30](#))

A. Land of Fathers ([v. 28](#))

28. “Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God.

Those left behind in Judah after 597 BC, “the poorest people of the land” (2 Kings 24:14), had been claiming that the land of Canaan no longer belonged to those taken into exile. But God is the one who gave the land to their *ancestors* (patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) in the first place, through the leadership of Joshua (about 1400 BC). And God reserves for himself the decision regarding present and future ownership of the land of promise. All the tribes of divided Israel have forfeited this gift (see on Ezekiel 36:22, above). Even so, God promises to bring back the exiled Judeans—not merely to the land, but to a relationship with him (compare Jeremiah 30:22).

B. Absence of Famine (vv. 29, 30)

29. “I will save you from all your uncleanness. I will call for the grain and make it plentiful and will not bring famine upon you.

The people’s impurity is due to idol worship (Ezekiel 36:25, above). By turning to the Lord, the people will be pure once again. Famine, often a discipline of the Lord for unfaithfulness (examples: Deuteronomy 32:19-24; 1 Kings 17:1), will no longer be a problem. To the contrary, the crops will be abundant; the Lord himself will cause the bounty.

30. “I will increase the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field, so that you will no longer suffer disgrace among the nations because of famine.

The abundance will extend to all agriculture, whether *the fruit of the trees* or *the crops of the field*. Agriculture in Israel includes grapes, olives, figs, and grains such as wheat and barley.

Famine brings not just physical suffering but also shame, especially when marked as an act of divine punishment. Bountiful crops, the opposite of famine, remove that reproach and disgrace. *The nations* will no longer look at the Lord’s people as abandoned by him.

What Do You Think?

How would you respond to a believer who uses Ezekiel 36:29, 30 to assert that those who are truly cleansed by God will never face economic reversals or hardships?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Considering the context of the passage

Considering Matthew 19:23, 24; John 15:20; 2 Corinthians 6:3-10; Revelation 2:9; etc.

Other

IV. Repentant People

(EZEKIEL 36:31, 32)

A. Ashamed (v. 31)

31. “Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices.

Having been blessed by the grace of God, the Israelites will come to see clearly how disgraceful their former behavior has been. They will repent of their former ways, coming to loathe their past unfaithfulness (compare Ezekiel 6:9).

The *evil ways* and *wicked deeds* of the exiles are grounded in idol worship. The Israelites were told hundreds of years earlier that they were neither to worship the fictitious gods of the pagans nor worship the Lord God in the manner that the pagans worshipped their gods (Exodus 23:24; Deuteronomy 12:30, 31). But the people are guilty of both, having engaged in grossly immoral practices in the process. They will do well to loathe such behavior.

LOATHING . . . WHAT?

The term *self-loathing* has come into vogue in recent years. It commonly refers to a person who is uncomfortable with his or her identity. Self-loathing may result from being identified as part of a certain demographic segment of humanity, inclusion in which the individual has no control over. Self-hate (a sometime synonym) may also be traced to voluntary choices that have resulted in destructive and/or shameful behavior. Self-hatred is understandable in many contexts. But it is better to focus hatred on the behavior that breaks relationship with God: the behavior of sin.

The nation of Israel as a whole had sinned against God in serious ways. Prophets had called for repentance, but the nation had refused. The people had every reason to hate their shameful, sinful behavior (a first step toward repentance), but many or most did not. Failure of leadership to set the proper example played a large part (Ezekiel 8:9-12; 13:1-7; 14:1-3). Ezekiel’s message was rejected by the people who should have been most aware of their sin, namely those with whom he shared exile. But they thought little of him and his message (33:30-32).

Being created in the image of God is the best reason for not hating ourselves (Genesis 1:26, 27). But that is also the best reason to hate sin, a vital step toward repentance and forgiveness. That doesn’t mean having a “holier than thou” attitude. It *does* mean having a desire to be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:15, 16).

—C. R. B.

What Do You Think?

To what extent is it appropriate for Christians to engage in self-loathing? Why?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding voluntary choices

Regarding involuntary circumstances

B. Confounded (v. 32)

³². **“I want you to know that I am not doing this for your sake, declares the Sovereign LORD. Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, people of Israel!”**

Once again God confirms that the people have not earned any consideration. He does not intend to act for their sake, but for his own. He does not reward any merit on their part. They have no merit. Their deeds deserve only rejection.

God wants the exiles to understand this, so he takes care to explain it and repeat the explanation. The people are to be ashamed of their former conduct. The grace he will grant them is not to mislead them into thinking that his favor is due to anything on their part. He wants them to see their former behavior for what it is.

That is the only sure deterrent to repeating bad behavior. The law can impose penalties, but that by itself does not prevent a repetition of the unlawful behavior. The person who has sinned has to come to see the sinfulness of his or her own behavior. That is what God challenges the people to do. Once they come to see their own sin's shamefulness, its disgrace, they will be cured of repeating it.

Ever since the time of the judges, which began about 1380 BC, the people have wavered between faithfulness to God and the worship of idols. Elijah had offered the people this challenge on Mount Carmel: “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him” ([1 Kings 18:21](#)). The wavering must stop!

Conclusion

A. Learning to Blush

Everyone has had the experience of saying something embarrassing. Perhaps it was as innocent as simply getting our words tangled so that what came out of our mouths was not at all what we intended. Or maybe it was not so innocent, and we said something unkind about an individual whom we thought was not within earshot. Then we realized the person overheard us after all. The combination of words and circumstance caused us to embarrass ourselves. And we blushed. It's a natural reaction.



Sheet 4—Fall 2017, *Adult Resources*, Standard Lesson Quarterly® Curriculum

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Visual for Lesson 4. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask, “In what ways has a Spirit-filled heart changed your outlook on life?”

But Jeremiah spoke of a time in Israelite history when the people did not know how to blush. They sinned against God and, when they learned of their sin, still felt no shame. “Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush” ([Jeremiah 6:15](#); [8:12](#)).

When Ezekiel told the people to be “ashamed and disgraced,” he used a Hebrew word very closely associated with the one translated “blush” in Jeremiah. Both men lived in a culture where shame seemed to be a lost concept. The same was true in Paul’s day ([1 Corinthians 5:1, 2](#)). The same is true in ours.

And what a great loss it is! Until we can be ashamed of our sin, we will not be able to see things as God does.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, may a keen sense of our unworthiness bring forth the sense of shame that leads to repentance. May we never treat sin lightly or assume that it is anything less than detestable. May that attitude lead us to abandon sin and walk in holiness. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

For hearts to be changed,
they must be receptive to change.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Write on the board some familiar euphemisms—phrases used to obscure the meanings of more negative terms. Some examples (with their harsher meanings, which you won't write) are *workforce imbalance correction* (layoffs), *economically disadvantaged* (poor), *culturally deprived environment* (slums), *courtesy call* (telemarketing), *negative patient outcome* (death), *commit terminological inexactitude* (lie), *pre-enjoyed vehicle* (used car); *correctional facility* (prison).

Ask learners to identify the intended meanings behind these carefully worded terms. Spend a few minutes discussing ways people try to hide their true feelings, motives, and agendas from others.

Lead into Bible study by saying, “Sadly, experience has taught us not to take people at face value. Too often there are motives in human hearts that are hidden behind various fronts of euphemisms. God, however, is very clear about his motives. He wants a different type of heart in his people. Let’s learn about that.”

Into the Word

Divide the class into three groups. Supply each group with pen and paper and one of the following research assignments.

Group 1—For the sake of God’s name

1. Read [Ezekiel 36:22, 23](#) and underline the words *name* and *sake* every time they appear. What is God saying about the sake of his name?
2. Read the following passages and list what God does for the sake of his name: [1 Samuel 12:22](#); [Psalm 23:3](#); [31:3](#); [Isaiah 48:9](#); [Jeremiah 14:21](#).

Group 2—Renewal of a people by give and take

1. Read [Ezekiel 36:24-30](#).
2. Make a list of what God will take away from his people and another list of what he will give to his people. Compare and contrast the lists.

Group 3—Reminder of unworthiness

1. Agree or disagree with the statement: “God wants us to feel good about ourselves.” Compare and contrast your answers with [Ezekiel 36:31, 32](#).
2. Read [Psalm 51](#) (focusing on [vv. 3-7, 11, 17](#)). Tell how David agrees with Ezekiel about feeling good about oneself.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “The Divine Agenda” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work individually or in pairs to match items on God’s agenda for Israel to the verses in which they are promised.

Into Life

Distribute to each learner a paper heart (homemade or purchased). Give these directions: “On this heart, write, with a ballpoint pen, ‘My New Heart.’ Keep this heart somewhere nearby this week. Keep a simple lead pencil with it.” (You may want to provide little pencils with erasers for the class.)

Continue: “When you are struck that there is something amiss in your behavior and spiritual life, write it on the back side of the heart. Remember, though, that lead pencil writing is quite erasable . . . if the writer commits to eliminating it. That is our challenge from Ezekiel: let God erase our sin!”

Alternative. Distribute copies of the reproducible page activity “From Disgrace by Grace.” This exercise will foster both group discussion and personal examination for life application as it reviews and reinforces the following key ideas of the lesson text:

1. God’s name has been disgraced among the nations.
2. The way God’s honor can be restored is by the humble repentance and changed behavior of His people.