

**NBC Devotional**  
**March 15, 2023**  
**“God’s Personal Cleansing”**

These verses are enveloped/surrounded by judgment from the Lord accusing the people of Israel of profaning God's name, and forewarning them that they will remember their evil ways, loathe themselves for their sins, and be ashamed (vv. 22-23; 31-32). Sandwiched in-between these harsh judgments, we hear a proclamation of God's intimate mercy and grace. Chiastic structures like this often serve to bring emphasis to that which is in the middle of the sandwich: the peanut butter and jelly, the cheese, the brisket, the lobster meat; whatever you like best, enveloped between your bread.

Among the highlighted verses, verse 26 often grabs the spotlight. It announces the popular gift of a new heart and a new spirit which God will place within His people. However, I would like us to consider verses 25 and 28 for the next few moments. As part of this oracle of renewal and restoration, God declares that He will cleanse His people: the Lord proclaims, "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."

We are told that Ezekiel was a priest (Ezek. 1:3), and this terminology of clean and unclean stated clearly evokes the purity regulations of Leviticus 12-15 which were under the jurisdiction of the priests. When a person became unclean, they were required to wash their clothes, bathe their body, and bring the appropriate purification offering to the priest. Depending on the type of the impurity, the priest would examine the person to determine if, indeed, they were clean (i.e., skin disease), and the priest would sacrifice the offering in order to achieve atonement and cleansing for the person. It is important to recognize that in our Ezekiel passage, the uncleanness is not just ceremonial uncleanness, which is not sinful, unless one neglects to wash and thereby, defiles the place of God's presence; but our passage also includes moral uncleanness as indicated by the accusation of idolatry.

What is striking about Ezek. 36:25 is that God is described as the one doing the cleaning. Of course, it was always understood that God was the one who actually brought about cleansing in terms of forgiveness and a state of purity. But, the ritual of washing and bathing was always done by the person themselves. In this passage, however, God will sprinkle water on the persons, and God will cleanse them. Imagine an otherwise healthy adult coming to visit with us having recklessly contaminated themselves with mud and filth and germs, having rolled in manure and spittle and smelling foul from heavy smoke. Our first response would likely be, "Go and clean yourself, and then come to me to share fellowship."

In contrast, Ezekiel suggests an image in which God takes up water and cleans His dirty people. Such an image creates a sharp contrast to the fastidious purity regulations which emphasize how God cannot abide impurity/uncleanness. In fact, it is in the book of Ezekiel itself where we find the glory of God abandoning the temple due to the impurity of the people. Yet, here God is near enough, as if to take a washcloth and scrub His children clean. The image is a preview of God, defiling Himself in the person of Jesus Christ by dining with sinners and touching lepers.

In case it seems the image is not strong enough, there is a subtle shift in priestly terminology which reinforces the picture of God's nearness. Priestly terminology in the Bible is often recognized as precise and meticulous. There are two Hebrew terms which might be used in Ezek. 36:25 which are variously translated, "to sprinkle," "to dash," "to toss," or something similar. The Hebrew term, *nazah*, is

specifically used in relation to the purification offering and in circumstances denoting cleansing and consecration. In contrast, the Hebrew term, zaraq, is used in relation to burnt offerings and well-being offerings which denote invocation, devotion, and fellowship with the Lord.[1]

Given the focus on cleansing in Ezek. 36:25 we expect that the priest Ezekiel will use the term nazah, indicating cleansing and consecration. However, unexpectedly, we find a form of the term, zaraq, is used here instead. This suggests an added focus on the invocation of God's presence, devotion expressed by God Himself and/or the cleansed community, and intimate fellowship between God and people. This break from the norm with regard to priestly terminology, reinforces the image of God as personally and intimately cleansing and restoring His people.

I do not know how factual it is, but years ago, I heard of an experiment which I have since found described on the internet. Allegedly, an experiment was conducted in 1944 in which two groups of 20 newborn infants each were housed in special facilities. One group was assigned caregivers who fed, bathed, and changed diapers for the infants; but never looked at, or touched the babies beyond what was necessary to provide for their physical needs. The environment was kept sterile, and the babies never became ill. The experiment was stopped after four months because half of the babies had died at that point.

The second group of babies was cared for in a separate facility. They also had all their physical needs met. In addition, their caregivers provided them with intentional acts of affection. In the second group, no deaths occurred.

Our passage provides an image of God graciously providing, not only cleansing, but doing so with an emphasis on intimacy and fellowship. This is further affirmed by God's gracious words in verse 28, "you shall be my people, and I will be your God." That phrase, in various forms, appears especially in connection with God's covenant relationship all the way back with Abraham and his descendants, and emphasized again with the children of Israel.

Twenty-seven years ago, I was flying back to San Francisco from Colorado Springs. The trip had been to secure housing as I had just recently gained employment at Nazarene Bible College and would soon be moving my family to Colorado. Up to that point, I had only ever known life as a student (with the exception of some ministerial positions to support my education habit). I was graduating from the 28th grade. On that flight back to San Francisco, I was exhausted and became frightened and depressed. Alone with my thoughts, I realized my world was about to change dramatically. I was going to move my family across the country.

But, more frightening than that, I was about to transition from behind the student desks in the classroom to the podium at the front of the classroom. I was going to become accountable to an administration responsible for my oversight. Despite graduating from the 28th grade, I feared I was not capable or worthy of what lie ahead. I looked out the window of the plane. It was late, and the sky was dark below and above; we were engulfed in darkness. However, across the western horizon ahead of us, there was a brilliant ribbon of blood-red sunset which stood out in stark contrast to the surrounding darkness. The ribbon was vermillion in color; a deep blood red. I was suddenly impressed by the words, "I love you that much; I shed my blood for you; I will carry you through." I had heard similar words before as cliché in others' testimonies, but this time it was made personal and intimate as God spoke comfort and affirmation to me.

I hope we all hear the words from Ezekiel in a similar manner: "You shall be my people, and I will be your God."

There is something earthshaking, and at the same time foundationally assuring, in hearing that the Creator of the universe is not only God, but seeks to be "my God"/"your God"; personally and intimately.

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