

Homiletics Analysis: Ezekiel 36

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Ezekiel 36 divides into two major movements. The first (vv. 1–15) addresses the mountains of Israel directly, reversing the oracle against Edom and the nations from chapter 35: the land that was mocked, plundered, and occupied will be restored, fruitful, and repopulated. The second and theologically weightier movement (vv. 16–38) addresses Israel's restoration from a startlingly God-centered vantage point. God does not restore Israel because they deserve it — He is explicit that they do not (vv. 17–20, 31–32). He restores them because His holy name has been profaned among the nations, and He will act for the sake of that name. The mechanism of restoration is then unpacked in one of the most concentrated passages in the Old Testament on inner transformation: a new heart, a new spirit, the removal of the heart of stone, the indwelling of God's Spirit, and the consequent — not preconditioned — obedience of His people (vv. 25–27). The chapter closes with promises of agricultural abundance, rebuilt cities, and a community so visibly blessed that the surrounding nations will recognize the LORD's handiwork (vv. 33–38).

This Text — Intent:

God is seeking to accomplish two things simultaneously through this passage. First, He is demolishing every form of self-congratulatory religion: Israel cannot look at her restoration as the fruit of her merit, her repentance, or her return — God is acting despite her, and He insists she know it (vv. 22, 32). Second, and inseparably, He is laying the only possible foundation for genuine transformation: a transformation accomplished entirely from outside the self — new heart, new spirit, Spirit-given obedience — so that what the law demanded but could not produce, God supplies unconditionally. The intended effect on the reader is both humbling and liberating: God's redemptive work is untethered from human worthiness, which means it is also indestructible.

Subject Sentence: God restores Israel not for her sake but for His name's sake — and by transforming her from within.

Primary Claim: God's restoration of His people is grounded entirely in His own holy character, not in human deserving — and the transformation He promises is one only He can accomplish, replacing stone hearts with hearts of flesh, and supplying the Spirit who produces the obedience the law required but could never generate.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Scope of “New Heart / New Spirit” (vv. 25–27) — Eschatological Fulfillment vs. Progressive Realization:

The central exegetical question is whether vv. 25–27 describe a transformation fully realized in the new covenant community through the Spirit’s work in regeneration (Reformed reading), a progressive national renewal already partially underway in Israel’s post-exilic return (some dispensational and historical readings), or a future millennial fulfillment yet entirely unrealized (classical dispensationalism). The text itself resists a purely post-exilic historical reading: no 6th–5th century return from Babylon produced anything approaching the wholesale spiritual transformation described here — the prophets themselves (Ezra, Nehemiah, Malachi) document continued covenant failure immediately after the return. The claim that “you shall keep my rules and be careful to obey my statutes” (v. 27) as a Spirit-produced inevitability was not visibly fulfilled in the restoration period. Classical dispensationalism defers the entire passage to a future millennial Israel and resists applying vv. 25–27 to the church. This reading must be **qualified**: the passage is addressed to national Israel and has a future physical-restoration dimension that the New Testament does not simply dissolve. However, the *mechanism* of vv. 25–27 — new heart, new spirit, Spirit-given obedience — is precisely what the New Testament claims has arrived in the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31–34 + Hebrews 8; Acts 2; 2 Corinthians 3:3–6). The Reformed reading is preferable: the passage describes realities inaugurated in Christ and applied through the Spirit in regeneration, with a full eschatological completion still ahead. The passage is not either/or — it is already/not yet.

“For My Name’s Sake” — Motivation and the Exclusion of Human Merit (vv. 22–23, 32):

Lutheran and Wesleyan interpreters generally affirm that restoration here is rooted in divine grace, but Wesleyan readings can resist the sharpest edge of God’s stated motivation — that He acts explicitly *despite* Israel’s unworthiness and not *in response to* her repentance. Verse 32 is striking: “It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel.” The Reformed reading **acknowledges** that Wesleyan expositors rightly emphasize the call to shame and repentance that does appear in the text (v. 31) — genuine affective response to grace is expected. But the Wesleyan tendency to read human response as in some sense conditioning or cooperative with divine action is **refuted** by the text’s own sequencing: God acts first, for His own name’s sake, before and apart from any human response. The Spirit-given obedience of v. 27 is the *result* of God’s transforming work, not a precondition for it.

Verses 25–27 and Baptismal Regeneration (Roman Catholic and Some Lutheran Readings):

The “sprinkling of clean water” in v. 25 is occasionally read as anticipating baptismal regeneration, where the sacrament is the instrument through which the new heart is granted. This reading should be **refuted** on contextual grounds: the sprinkling language in v. 25 is drawn from Levitical purification rites (Numbers 19) and functions here as a metaphor for thoroughgoing cleansing from idolatry and covenant transgression — it does not describe a water rite but a spiritual reality. The verses are structured as a triplet of divine actions (cleanse, give new heart, put my Spirit) functioning as a unified whole — the point is not the mode of cleansing but the completeness and divine origin of transformation. The Reformed reading connects the passage to regeneration by the Spirit, not to any sacramental mechanism.

Key Canonical Support

- **Jeremiah 31:31–34** — The parallel new covenant passage: God will write His law on their hearts, not on stone tablets; they will know Him from the least to the greatest; He will forgive their iniquity. Ezekiel 36 is the *how* to Jeremiah 31’s *what* — Jeremiah announces the new covenant; Ezekiel describes the Spirit-wrought inner transformation that makes covenant obedience possible.
 - **Deuteronomy 30:6** — “The LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart.” The “heart of stone” problem is anticipated in the Mosaic framework itself — Moses knew the law could not produce what only God could accomplish internally. Ezekiel 36 is the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 30’s promise.
 - **2 Corinthians 3:2–6** — Paul contrasts the ministry of the old covenant (letter written on stone) with the new covenant (Spirit writing on hearts of flesh), citing Ezekiel 36 implicitly. Paul reads the passage as inaugurated in the new covenant community — not deferred, not nationalistic only, but arriving in Christ and the Spirit.
 - **Acts 2:38 / Romans 8:9–11** — Pentecost is the visible inauguration of the Spirit-indwelling promised in v. 27; Paul’s argument in Romans 8 that the Spirit produces what the law could not is the direct theological outworking of Ezekiel 36:26–27. The new heart that keeps God’s statutes is the believer in whom the Spirit dwells and produces fruit.
 - **Titus 3:5–6** — “He saved us... by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” The language of cleansing, Spirit-renewal, and lavish divine outpouring resonates directly with Ezekiel 36:25–27, and Paul connects it explicitly to divine initiative apart from human works — “not because of works done by us in righteousness.”
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Aim: To establish that the only legitimate ground for both assurance and transformation is what God has accomplished from outside the self — in His own name, by His own Spirit — so that neither pride nor despair has any remaining purchase.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Command to prophesy to the mountains of Israel; the enemy has gloated, “Aha!” over the ancient heights	Direct address to the land; Edom’s taunt (cf. ch. 35) is in view
3–5	Because the nations made Israel desolate and plundered, their lips have reproached the land	God names the offense against the land — it is also an offense against His name
6–7	God speaks in His jealousy against the nations surrounding Israel; they will bear their own shame	Divine jealousy for the land = divine honor at stake
8–10	The mountains of Israel will bear fruit; Israel will return; towns will be rebuilt and inhabited	Reversal begins — from desolation to fruitfulness
11	Man and beast will multiply; blessings will exceed former times	Eschatological excess — former days will not compare
12–15	The land will no longer devour its people or bereave the nations of their children	Reversal of the land’s curse; the land itself is healed
16–17	God recounts Israel’s pre-exile defilement — uncleanness like a menstrual cloth	Blunt image; Israel’s sin was covenant impurity before God
18–19	God poured out His wrath and scattered them for bloodshed and idolatry	Exile was just; exile was deserved
20	But in exile, Israel profaned God’s holy name when nations said, “These are the LORD’s people, yet they had	The scandal: God’s reputation is bound to Israel’s fate in the nations’ eyes

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	to leave His land”	
21–22	God acts not for Israel’s sake but for His holy name’s sake	Pivotal statement — the engine of restoration is divine honor, not human merit
23	God will vindicate the holiness of His great name; the nations will know He is the LORD	Theodicy purpose: restoration is a demonstration to the nations
24	God will gather Israel from the nations and bring them into their own land	Physical return precedes inner transformation
25	God will sprinkle clean water on them; they will be clean from all uncleanness and idols	Thoroughgoing purification — complete cleansing of past defilement
26	God will give a new heart and put a new spirit within them; He will remove the heart of stone and give a heart of flesh	The most concentrated inner-transformation promise in the OT
27	God will put His Spirit within them and cause them to walk in His statutes and keep His rules	Spirit-caused obedience — not commanded, but produced
28	They will dwell in the land; they will be God’s people and He will be their God	Covenant formula restored: the goal of all redemptive history
29–30	God will deliver them from all uncleannesses; grain and fruit will be multiplied; no more famine	Material blessing flows from spiritual restoration
31	They will remember their former evil ways and loathe themselves for their iniquities	Repentance follows transformation — it is the fruit, not the root
32	“It is not for your sake that I will act” — let that be known; be ashamed and confounded	Second explicit denial of merit; shame is the appropriate response to grace

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
33–35	In the day of cleansing, cities will be rebuilt, desolate land tilled; nations will say the desolate land is like Eden	Visible transformation of the physical landscape signals spiritual reality
36	The nations around will know the LORD has rebuilt and replanted — He has spoken and will do it	External witness function: restoration is a proclamation to the watching world
37–38	God will let Israel inquire of Him; He will multiply them like a flock for sacrifice; the waste cities will be full	Final image: teeming, populous restoration; God as shepherd-multiplier

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–15	The Land Vindicated: God’s Jealous Promise to Restore the Mountains of Israel
2	16–21	The Problem Named: Israel Profaned God’s Name and the Exile Proved It
3	22–32	The Engine Declared: God Acts for His Name’s Sake — Not Israel’s — Through Total Inner Transformation
4	33–38	The Outcome Displayed: A Visible Restoration That Witnesses to the Nations

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God restores Israel not for her sake but for His name’s sake — and by transforming her from within.

Primary Claim: God’s restoration of His people is grounded entirely in His own holy character, not in human deserving — and the transformation He promises is one only He can accomplish, replacing stone hearts with hearts of flesh, and supplying the Spirit who produces the obedience the law required but could never generate.

Applications (Five)

1. (*Mind/Belief*) Stop trying to make yourself worthy of restoration before coming to God.

The sequencing of Ezekiel 36 is irreversible: God acts first, for His own name's sake, before Israel shows any sign of fitness for return. The clean water comes before the new heart; the new heart comes before the obedience; the obedience comes before the visible fruitfulness. The person who tells themselves "I'll come back to God when I've gotten my act together" has misread the architecture of grace entirely. You do not become clean in order to receive the Spirit — the Spirit is the agent of cleansing. Come with the stone heart. That is exactly what this passage promises to replace.

2. (*Affections/Worship*) Let the words "not for your sake" land as both devastating and liberating — and let them produce genuine shame, not performance.

Verse 32 is not a throwaway qualifier; it is God insisting that Israel understand the nature of what is happening. "Be ashamed and confounded for your ways." This is not the shame of the condemned — it is the shame of the unworthy beloved, the shame that can only arise when grace is understood. If your response to God's restoration of you is pride in your spiritual progress, you have not yet heard v. 32. Meditate on the plain statement: "It is not for your sake." Let it do its work. Real shame before grace is not toxic self-loathing — it is the affective posture of someone who finally understands what they were and what they have been given.

3. (*Mind/Belief*) Understand that the Spirit-given obedience of v. 27 is the normal Christian life — not an elite tier of spirituality.

"I will put my Spirit within you, and *cause* you to walk in my statutes." The verb is causative. The obedience that God demands in the law, He produces in the Spirit. This means the struggling believer who cannot seem to achieve what the law requires is not being told to try harder — they are being told to receive more fully. The New Testament's elaboration of this passage (Romans 8, 2 Corinthians 3, Galatians 5) treats Spirit-produced obedience as the baseline expectation of life in Christ, not a spiritual advanced class. Where obedience is absent, the diagnostic question is not "am I disciplined enough?" but "am I depending on the Spirit or on myself?"

4. (*Will/Behavior*) Identify the specific idols — the "uncleannesses" — from which God promises to cleanse, and confess them by name rather than in the abstract.

Verse 25 promises cleansing "from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols." Verse 29 returns to this: "I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses." The repetition is deliberate. God is not offering a general spiritual freshening — He is targeting specific forms of defilement. Abstract repentance ("I'm sorry for my sins") applied to specific idolatry is like cleaning a wound with a wave of the hand rather than the antiseptic. Ask

specifically: what are the functional saviors in your life that parallel Israel's idols — the things you trust for security, significance, or satisfaction that are not the LORD? Name them to God. The promise of cleansing is specific enough to cover them.

5. (*Affections/Worship*) Let the watching-nations dimension of this passage recalibrate your understanding of why your visible life matters.

Verses 23, 36, and 38 all emphasize the same point: the nations are watching, and the restoration of God's people is a proclamation to them. "The nations will know that I am the LORD." This is not a secondary concern — it is woven into the chapter's stated purpose from v. 22 onward. The visible fruitfulness of a transformed community is itself a form of witness. This does not mean manufacturing a performance of health and joy — it means that the genuine transformation worked by the Spirit in believers has an audience beyond themselves. Your changed life is not merely for your benefit. It is God vindicating His name in the sight of those watching you.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Ezekiel 36 establishes one of the most foundational principles of Old Testament theology: that God's redemptive actions are ultimately theocentric — grounded in His own name, character, and honor — rather than anthropocentric. This is not a peripheral claim but the explicit load-bearing argument of the chapter's central section (vv. 22–32). God acts *for the sake of His holy name* — not in response to merit, not as a reward for repentance, not as cooperation with human initiative. Simultaneously, the passage reveals God's resolution of the deepest theological problem in the Mosaic covenant: if the law demands obedience that the heart of stone cannot produce, only a divine act of inner transformation can break the cycle. The promise of vv. 26–27 — new heart, new spirit, Spirit-caused obedience — is God's answer to what the law exposed but could not fix. Theology proper, pneumatology, and soteriology meet in three verses.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Ezekiel 36 is one of the Old Testament's most concentrated expressions of what Reformed theology calls monergism — the doctrine that regeneration and transformation are entirely God's work, wrought from outside the self, prior to and productive of the human response rather than conditioned by it. The explicit denial of human merit ("not for your sake," v. 22; v. 32), the causative Spirit-indwelling of v. 27, and the placement of repentance and shame *after* the transforming work (v. 31) all resist any synergistic reading. Reformed soteriology has always insisted that the new birth precedes the exercise of saving faith — here that logic is displayed in prophetic form before the New Testament articulates it in systematic form. Furthermore, the chapter's theodicy dimension — restoration as the vindication of God's name before the nations —

anticipates Paul's argument in Romans 3:25–26 that the cross itself is a “demonstration of His righteousness” and not merely a mechanism of individual salvation. God's glory and human salvation are not competing concerns in this passage; they are the same concern, approached from two angles.

Main Takeaway

The restoration God promises in Ezekiel 36 is built entirely on what He does, not on what you bring — and the transformation at its center is one only He can accomplish from the inside out. The stone heart does not soften itself; the Spirit does not arrive because you earned Him; the obedience is *caused*, not mustered. Which means your only proper posture before this passage is shame that you needed it and gratitude that it is entirely His work — and then the freedom to stop managing your own transformation and start receiving what He alone supplies.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching vv. 26–27 as an invitation to try harder.** The most common mishandling of this passage — particularly in evangelical settings — is to take “I will give you a new heart” as a motivational call to be spiritually renewed, then pivot immediately to what listeners must now do. This inverts the text's architecture. The verbs are God's: *I will sprinkle, I will give, I will remove, I will put, I will cause*. The entire weight of the passage is on divine initiative. Preaching that moves from these verses to a behavioral checklist has not yet preached these verses.
- **Skipping vv. 16–22 to get to the “good part.”** The inner-transformation promises of vv. 25–27 are set within an explicit framework of divine motivation: God acts for His name, not for Israel's worthiness. Preachers who jump to the new heart without first establishing the “not for your sake” foundation will produce hearers who apply the promise to themselves as something they deserve, rather than as a scandalous act of grace toward those who deserve nothing. The bad news in vv. 16–21 is required scaffolding for the good news in vv. 25–27.
- **Applying v. 32 (“Be ashamed”) as law without gospel.** There is a temptation to use v. 32 as a shame-inducing rebuke — “look how unworthy you are” — without connecting it to its context: this is the shame that *follows* grace, not the shame that earns it. Shame that is not surrounded by the extravagant promise of the surrounding verses produces despair or defensiveness, not the godly grief the passage intends.
- **Treating the passage as purely futurist/national and therefore inapplicable.** Some expositors — particularly in dispensational contexts — restrict the passage

entirely to a future national Israel and decline to draw any application for the present church. While the passage does have a future-completion dimension that should not be collapsed, the New Testament's own use of Ezekiel 36 (2 Corinthians 3, Acts 2, Romans 8, Titus 3:5) establishes that the mechanism of vv. 25–27 is operative now in the new covenant community. Restricting the passage to the future robs the congregation of the pastoral force the New Testament apostles themselves found here.

- **Missing the theodicy/witness dimension.** Preachers who focus exclusively on individual regeneration (a legitimate emphasis) often fail to preach the chapter's explicit corporate-witness and nations-watching purpose (vv. 23, 36, 38). This passage is not merely about what God does for the individual — it is about what God is displaying to the watching world through the transformation of His community. Preaching that privatizes the chapter's application misses half of God's stated intent.
- **Failing to distinguish repentance as fruit from repentance as root.** Verse 31 — “then you will remember your evil ways and loathe yourselves” — comes after the Spirit-transformation, not before it. The chapter explicitly sequences repentance as the fruit of new-heart work, not the condition for it. Preachers must be careful not to flip the order and imply that sufficient sorrow for sin will unlock the new heart. In Ezekiel 36, deep repentance is what Spirit-transformed people do; it is not what makes them eligible for transformation.