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Get a New Heart!

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Ezekiel 18:1-4;25-32

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

To me a heart transplant is one of the most fascinating surgeries in modern times. A diseased and dying heart can be removed from a living human being. In its place, a healthy, thriving heart from a donor can be implanted. A person who had weeks or even days to live is given a new life when they have a new heart.

Do you need a heart transplant? I pray that the heart inside your chest is not diseased and in need of a transplant. But what if we take the figurative definition of the word heart? Heart: one's innermost character; the center of the total personality. Like the saying "He has a heart of gold." His innermost character and the center of his total personality is gold. It's a high complement, isn't it? What if a person has a heart of stone... can a person get a new heart? A new innermost character? And here's the tough question I want you to wrestle with today: Do *you* have a heart of gold? Or do you have a heart of stone?

Here's why this question is so important: if our innermost character is corrupt and if we are in essence diseased on the inside, we are facing immanent death. Unlike the person with a disease physical heart who faces physical death, the person with a diseases innermost character faces eternal death... an eternal separation from God. Let's answer this vital question.

We turn to God's word for his answers. We're looking at Ezekiel 18. A little background would be useful here. Ezekiel was God's prophet who spoke God's word to the people of Israel who had been taken captive and exiled to Babylon. Now understand that Judah had not yet been completely destroyed by the Babylonians. But Ezekiel was warning the people already in exile that God's total judgment was coming. Because of their wickedness and the wickedness of the people still in Judah, God would allow the Babylonians to once again invade and they would completely destroy Jerusalem and destroy the temple.

God's loving warning had a purpose: that the people would repent, turn from their sins, receive his forgiveness and live. But listen to what the people said:

**Ezekiel 18:1-4 The word of the LORD came to me: "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: "'The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"? "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son—both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die.**

So Israel heard God say, "You will be punished!" And instead of repenting, the people quoted a parable: "**The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.**" What does that mean? A good modern paraphrase of it would be, "Father ate a lemon, and the children's lips puckered up." But what does this proverb really mean?

This proverb reflected a sinful way of thinking of the Israelites. They figured that since their parents and grandparents had started a particular sin, God would simply blame the previous generation for the sin. The Israelites reasoned, "It's not fair for God to punish us for a sin our parents introduced! And since the previous generations are the real guilty ones for the sin, we can continue in our sin." The Israelites didn't want to take personal responsibility for their sins. Suppose every time we were guilty of sin, we used the excuse, "Don't blame me! My father introduced such sins into our family." This was their attitude, and God didn't like it one bit. With this proverb readily on their lips, the Israelites continued to sin against God. They thought, "Either way, we'll be punished. No sense in even trying to obey God." So they didn't. They worshipped other gods. They were sexually immoral. They robbed one another. Basically they ignored God and his law. It was this type of attitude that outraged God.

God was telling them, you've got a bad heart... a sin-diseased, decaying heart! And their response was, "We inherited it, so no matter what we do, we're doomed! We're not to blame!"

It's amazing how prevalent this very same attitude is in modern times. Everywhere you look, people are trying to limit and remove our responsibility for our actions. Doctors, psychologists, geneticists, and lawyers are all claiming the same thing. We're not guilty for the sins we commit. You've heard the reports. **Children of alcoholics** are much more likely to become alcoholics. Another report says **homosexuality** is caused by a chemical difference in the brain. Other reports prove that children who are **sexually or physically abused** are more likely to be criminals when they grow up. What do all of these reports imply? We shouldn't condemn people who sin. We inherit our tendencies toward certain sins. Sinners are helpless victims of bad genes or an evil environment! We are a nation of victims who, no matter what the crime, are not guilty! Our nation has every indicator of a bad heart. A rottenness in innermost character.

But we can't wag our finger at the Israelites or even at modern society, because don't you and I do the same thing? How many times in the last week did you start a sentence, "It's not my fault that..." Or "I'm the *only* one." Or "you people!" Or "If only they! Or if only you would..." Ever heard the phrase, "It's hard to soar like an eagle when you're surrounded by a bunch of turkeys!" And we buy into that, and blame our problems and failings on the incompetent or failing people around us. Do you blame your current way of doing things on your past? "I was never taught." Or "That's just the way we did it in my family." Or "if you knew my Mom, or if you knew my Dad, you'd know why I am this way." "If you knew what happened to me..." Or you blame genetics. "I was just born this way."

However you play the blame game, the result is the same. You are denying that you have a heart problem. You're in essence saying to almighty God, "My innermost character is good! There are countless external causes that explain my wrong attitudes and behavior!"

God, however, says, "Your sins don't belong to previous generations. Your bad heart can't be blamed on others. Your sins belong to you. You are responsible. And then he drops the bomb: "**The soul who sins is the one who will die.**" No excuses. No blame game. No exceptions. You sinned? You die. That simple.

Blaming others and circumstances doesn't fix a diseased heart. So some people in desperation take the blame game to the extreme, and they are actually so bold as to blame God.

They say, “How can God send people to hell if he is the Creator? That isn’t fair! Ultimately God is to blame!” Other say, “If someone hasn’t heard Jesus, how could God punish them? It’s not their fault they haven’t heard.” Still others say, “There are many good people who are very kind and merciful. God couldn’t damn such people! That wouldn’t be fair!” There’s nothing new. The people to whom Ezekiel prophesied did the same thing.

**Ezekiel 18:25-32 “Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Hear, O house of Israel: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust? If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin, he will die for it; because of the sin he has committed he will die. But if a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life. Because he considers all the offenses he has committed and turns away from them, he will surely live; he will not die. Yet the house of Israel says, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Are my ways unjust, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust? “Therefore, O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign LORD.**

God makes this super simple for us, and he takes away all wiggle room. Are you so bold as to try to blame God and call him unfair? God says this: Did you sin? Did you do wrong? Then you will die. Period. Are you righteous? Do you do right? Great. You will live. “But God made us this way!” God didn’t hold a gun to your head and make you sin. You’ve sometimes resisted. For your sin, you die. Simple. “But some people haven’t heard about Jesus! It’s not their fault!” Jesus or not... have they done wrong? Have they disobeyed God? Yes? They die. “But what about the people who do so much good!” What about them? Are they perfect? No. Have they sinned? Yes. Then they die!

This is very straight forward. Friends, will you today stop playing the blame game and own up to your own sins, to your faults, to your moral failings? Will you come clean before God and lay your dirty laundry out before him? Listen to what he says:

**Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!**

If my words before sounded harsh, understand this: God doesn't like to see people die. God doesn't like to condemn people to hell. So what did he do about it? He took some extreme measures. Just ponder for a moment about the incredible sacrifice God made so we could live. God in his love sent Jesus, his one and only Son, to earth to redeem us. To redeem us, Jesus had to leave his Godly majesty and glory in heaven. To save us, Jesus had to humble himself. He had to live as a man under the law. He had to fulfill God’s law perfectly. He had to withstand every temptation of the devil.

That alone would be difficult. But Jesus also had to pay the penalty we owe for our sin. The reading from Philippians continues: “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (2:8)” Think of the incredible suffering the God-man Jesus endured for us. You know, we often think of his physical suffering, but that was nothing compared to the mental and spiritual suffering he endured. Imagine Jesus' loneliness at the very end of his life. He was abandoned by absolutely everyone. The people of Jerusalem turned against Jesus just a week after they welcomed him into Jerusalem (a week after what we call Palm Sunday). One of Jesus' very own disciples turned on Jesus and betrayed him.

The rest of Jesus' disciples abandoned Jesus when he was taken captive. Even Peter wouldn't admit to knowing Jesus when he was confronted as one of his disciples. The Roman government ignored justice and gave Jesus over to the people to be put to death. Finally, as Jesus hung all alone on that cross at Calvary, the most terrifying and unimaginable horror happened. God the Father had supported Jesus and been close to him throughout his life. But as Jesus hung on the cross, God was no longer with him. Not only was he forsaken by the world, but he was forsaken by God! In unimaginable anguish as Jesus suffered hell, he cried out on that cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Can we even begin to comprehend the love that was necessary to endure such agony? Can we understand how much God the Father loved us that he would sacrifice his dearly loved Son, Jesus, and put him through such agony? No, we can't understand such love. All we can do is believe it. God said it was so. He said, "I take no pleasure in the death of anyone." He showed how little he pleasures in death by the steps he took so we could live. That life is guaranteed to us because Jesus rose from the dead. Because he lives, we know for a fact that we also will live. God through Jesus did all that was necessary to bring us from death to life!

Although our God is just and willing to carry out his drastic threats and punishments, he doesn't like doing it. What he really wants is that people repent and live.

So how do we live? How do we receive the gift God has prepared for us? God said, "**Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall.**" Willful sin, unbelief and impenitence are barriers which hinder us from receiving God's gift of life. Unless we turn to him for forgiveness, unless we repent of our sins and turn away from our offenses, unless God gives us a new heart and new spirit, then Christ's blood doesn't benefit us. It remains an *unclaimed gift*. We must receive God's gift through repentance worked by the Holy Spirit.

It isn't unusual for lottery prizes to go unclaimed. A person buys a ticket, but then forgets about it, loses it, or just doesn't bother to check later if he had the winning number. Even though the prize belonged to that person, they don't get the money because they don't claim the money that's already theirs. Well, the gift of forgiveness that Christ won for us on the cross is absolutely guaranteed. It is already ours! God invites us to come and claim the gift he has given. We receive it through repentance and trust in Christ.

What is repentance? Perhaps repentance can be described more easily when we think of what it means **not** to repent. Impenitence is when we hold tightly to our sins. We refuse to acknowledge them. We attempt to hide them and ignore them. When we do such, we refuse to let God take them away. How can God remove and forgive sins which we won't let go of? How can Jesus bear sins for us which we insist on carrying ourselves? How can God declare us not guilty for Jesus sake, when we insist we have never been guilty? This is why God tells us to repent of our sins!

Friends, stop holding on to your sin which brings death. Stop blaming your circumstances or other people for the sins you commit. Stop pretending your heart is golden, and instead let go of the sin in your hearts. Confess it to God. Acknowledge your guilt. Plead to God for mercy. In his grace and forgiveness, God promises you that you **will not die!** God takes no pleasure in your death. He wants you to live. He's sacrificed his Son so you can live! Repent and believe! God promises and guarantees forgiveness of sins and life. God loves you so much, he has forgiven you for Jesus sake. Amen.