



**REAL: AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY IN A WORLD OF COUNTERFEITS**

**Getting to the Heart of *Real*:  
The Reality of a New Heart**

**Ezekiel 36:16-32**

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<sup>16</sup> The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>17</sup> “Son of man, when the house of Israel lived in their own land, they defiled it by their ways and their deeds. Their ways before me were like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual impurity. <sup>18</sup> So I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed in the land, for the idols with which they had defiled it. <sup>19</sup> I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries. In accordance with their ways and their deeds I judged them. <sup>20</sup> But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, ‘These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land.’ <sup>21</sup> But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.

<sup>22</sup> “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. <sup>23</sup> 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, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. <sup>24</sup> I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. <sup>25</sup> I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. <sup>26</sup> And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. <sup>28</sup> You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. <sup>29</sup> And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. And I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. <sup>30</sup> I will make the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field abundant, that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. <sup>31</sup> Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations. <sup>32</sup> 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.

## Introduction

The prophet Ezekiel realizes the nation of Israel is in really bad shape. Morally and spiritually, they're a mess. "Their ways before me were like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual impurity" (v. 17). Immorality and idolatry are everywhere. And, if the Lord's to be true to his character, he's got to judge his people. "So I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed in the land, for the idols with which they had defiled it" (v. 19).

Yet Israel's moral bankruptcy exposes an even deeper problem: *a problem of the heart*. Save for a few remnant, no one in Israel has a heart; at least, not a heart responsive to the things of God. They have hearts, but they're stone, not flesh—cold, hard, lifeless. They've got rocks in their chests!

Their gracious God, however, has a profoundly God-centered solution to their persistent heart problem? He's going to save them from themselves—though ultimately "not for your sake, O house of Israel . . . but for the sake of my holy name" (v. 22). But how does a holy God vindicate the holiness of his name? He does it by giving wayward, rebellious people, like you and me and Israel, a gift: *the gift of a new heart*.

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 on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh (vv. 24-26).

*The gift of a new heart, this is the heart of God's saving solution for sinful people*. This is how he delivers people from sin and how he restores honor to his own name. Our salvation and his glory, they come together in the gift of a new heart. And it's this gift of a new heart that makes all the difference in your life and mine; it's what makes you real.

Real Christianity is, in fact, all about the heart. The heart is at the heart of what it means to be real. The essence of authentic Christian experience is found in a heart that's alive in Christ and awake to God; a heart that pumps real desire for the Lord into your soul and throughout your life. This is what distinguishes the real from the not real, the true from the false, the authentic from the counterfeit. Real Christianity is all about the reality of the heart.

## Christians without Chests

Some of you, however, aren't entirely convinced of this. I say this because, as I listen to conversations about what it means to become a Christian or be a Christian, do you know what's often conspicuously absent?—the reality of the heart. Sometimes I hear folks talk about people getting saved, yet fail to consider whether they've been given a new heart, as though all you need to do is decide for Christ—voila!—you're real. Or I hear people talk about growing in Christ, yet not mention guarding or nurturing their own heart, as though real growth were simply about beliefs or behaviors. Or I hear people talk about coming to corporate worship, yet be more concerned about the atmosphere of the auditorium or the arrangement of the music than the alignment of their heart with the person of Christ. Or, my personal favorite, I sometimes hear people talk about preaching, as if it were all about communicating information and offering application—an easy to follow sermon outline and a few 'take-aways' to tryout

when you get home—with little or no concern that the preaching itself actually stir the heart! You see what's absent in all of this?—the heart.

C. S. Lewis coined a wonderful phrase to describe education that neglects the reality of the heart: when you teach without attending to the heart, you produce what Lewis calls 'men without chests'. They're all intellect or appetite, but no heart. But the problem with producing 'men without chests', Lewis says, is that they become little more than trousered apes or urban blockheads: they're either all animal appetite dressed up to look human, or all intellectual reasoning with no real desire or feeling or life.

By neglecting the reality of the heart, I'm afraid the church has produced a generation of *Christians without chests*: professing believers who try to live the Christian life without the heart. Their heads are full of all the right ideas about Christianity; indeed, they may have enough orthodox doctrine to tame even the most snarky postmodern relativist; or they may have a calendar filled to the brim with all the right church activities or Christian causes. But, if you were to take a closer look, you'd see there's no vital link between what's in their head and what they do with their lives—there's no heart. They're Christians without chests; that is, professing Christians who perhaps appear to be real, but have nothing decisively real going on inside of them.

Perhaps this widespread lack of attention to the reality of the heart explains the widespread lack of spiritual vitality in the contemporary church. Perhaps this is why Christianity is so spiritually anemic these days: why so-called 'born again' Christians are nearly tied with the rest of the society in rate of divorce, abuse of pornography, lack of charitable giving, and racial prejudice. Could it be we've successfully filled churches across America with professing Christians who lack new hearts? Or perhaps this is why *your life* lacks genuine spiritual vigor or depth. You've got the right ideas and do some of the right things; but if you're honest, there's no heart: there's no abiding desire for more and more of Jesus Christ.

## **The Reality of the Heart & the Focus of Scripture**

What's odd about Christians without chests is this: *Everywhere in Scripture, you find the heart at the heart of what it means to be real*. Every time the Bible talks about authentic Christianity, it speaks in the language of the heart, about the heart and to the heart. Whenever the Bible describes what it means to be a genuine follower of Jesus, the heart is always central to what's said. And anytime the Bible calls you to a real life of faith, you're being summoned to a heart that's alive in Christ and awake to God.

The Bible calls us to fear God, a response of the heart; to be zealous for his name, the energy of the heart; and to hope in his promises, a disposition of the heart. The Bible describes real Christians as those who seek the Lord, which is but the yearning of the heart. The Bible expects the godly to grieve over their sin, mourn the plight of the lost, lament the reality of sickness and disease and death. All this is done with the heart. The Bible invites us to give thanks to the Lord, rejoice with singing, worship him with gladness, none of which can be done without the heart. The Bible exhorts us to have compassion, show mercy, be generous, all of which flow from the heart. And the Bible, above all things, calls us to love, both God and our neighbor; not simply as an act of the will, devoid of real affection in your heart; that's Stoicism at best, Pharisaism at worst; it's not real Christianity or biblical love.

You see, then, biblical Christianity centers on the heart. Never is the heart peripheral. In fact, you can hardly read a page of Scripture and not be confronted with its focus on the heart. Thus, you can't stand on the Bible, and call yourself real, yet ignore the reality of the heart.

## **The Reality of the Heart & The Example of the Saints**

*But you see the heart at the heart of what it means to be real, not only in Scripture, but also in the lives of saints.* Exemplary Christians, who live authentic lives of faith, are set apart in this world by the reality of the heart. Their hearts are alive in Christ; they're not lifeless corpses masquerading as real Christians. Their hearts are awake to God; they're not still snoozing in unbelief even though they pretend to be spiritually wide-eyed and bushy-tailed. No, there's a dynamic relationship between the saint and his Savior: real intimacy, real affection, a real exchange. It is like a marriage, only better!

Consider King David, that 'man after God's own heart' (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22). He's the author of those "holy songs" we call Psalms, where we find "nothing else but the expressions and breathings of devout and holy affections."<sup>1</sup> And what shall we say of David, when we peer into his soul through the window of his Psalms?

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple (27:4).

As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? (42:1-2).

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water (63:1-2).

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God (84:1-2).

No wonder another great saint, the Bishop of Hippo, Saint Augustine, had the response he did when reading David's psalms:

How I cried out to you, my God, when I read the Psalms of David, those hymns of faith, those songs of a pious heart in which the spirit of pride can find no place! . . . How I cried out to you when I read those Psalms! How they set me on fire with love for you! I was burning to echo them to all the world, if only I could, so that they might vanquish man's pride.<sup>2</sup>

Or peruse, if you like, the letters of Paul, hear the exhortations of Peter, read the writings of John, listen to the testimony of a thousand saints in the great biographies of church history, or

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards, *Religious Affections*, p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> *Confessions*, p. 186.

envision those blessed souls who've already gone to glory and there worship the Lamb. What will you find? Again and again, you'll see lives set apart by the reality of the heart.

## **The Reality of the Heart & the Life of the Savior**

*But perhaps the only proof you really need to convince you that the heart is at the heart of what it means to be real, is to see the centrality of the heart in the life of our Savior.* Nowhere does real Christianity come into sharper focus than in the person of Christ. Yet when you look closely at our Savior's life, you see his heart at the heart of who he is.

What you see in the Savior is a heart ablaze for the glory of God: "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed" (John 17:4-5). What you see is a heart consumed with desire to do the will of God: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (John 4:34). What you see is a heart entirely yielded to his Father's good pleasure: "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death . . . Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:34, 36). What you see is a heart compelled by zeal for the Lord: "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade" (John 2:16).

What you see in the Savior is a heart all chewed-up over stubborn unbelief: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Luke 13:34). What you see is a heart disturbed to its core by the ugly face of sin and the menacing presence of death: "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus wept" (John 11:33-35). What you see is a heart unparalleled in humility and grace, inviting sinners to himself: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29). And what you see is a heart wholly given to loving his own, even to the point of death, death on a cross: "'Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1).

If we learn anything, then, from the life of our Savior, we learn that the heart is at the heart of who he is. Therefore, the heart *must be* at the heart of what it means for you and me to be real: to be true to who he is, to model our lives after him, to authentically follow in his footsteps, to have his very life indwelling our own.

## **Lament & Repent**

Yet, if all of this is true—if Christians without hearts is a real impossibility, something that shouldn't exist and indeed can't exist; and if the heart of real is the reality of the heart, as we see it is in the focus of Scripture, the example of the saints, and the life of our Savior—then how we ought to lament the state of our own hearts!

How sad, and how scary, that we can be so unmoved by the weighty realities of God and Christ and the gospel and the kingdom and eternity and heaven and hell! And far more easily moved by the fact that Romney is leading in South Carolina, or that the David Crowder Band

just released a new album, or that the Bears failed to make it to the playoffs, or that you get to sleep in tomorrow because it's MLK Jr. Day, or that you've got a Five Guys cheese burger and Cajun fries in your near future; or that I'm almost finished with a sermon about what, you're not entirely sure.

The Bible has a diagnosis for this sad disease we've all got; Scripture calls this affliction *hardness of heart*. A hard heart is what blinds us to the beauty of spiritual truth, numbs us to the prospect of everlasting life with God or eternal conscious torment in the fires of hell. A hard heart gives rise to every act of defiance (Exod. 14:8), obstinacy (Deut. 2:30), callousness (Deut. 15:7), rebellion (2 Chron. 36:13), pride (Dan. 5:20), even unbelief itself (Mark 16:14). In fact, every sin in your life or mine, whether of commission or omission, is directly traceable to the hardness of our hearts.

Some of you, I fear, still have hard hearts, not new heart. You hear God's word preached, you sing along with the music, you bow your head for the prayers, you shake hands with the saints after the service; yet all these rays of God's glory ricochet off your heart like BBs off a plate of steel. If hooked to a spiritual EKG, you'd register no pulse! Even now, therefore, I fear, Jesus looks at you the way he did some of the churchy folks in his day: "with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart" (Mark 3:5).

There is only one cure for hardness of heart. It's a cure only God himself can give. And that's to give you a new heart. "Man's heart may be hard," says Saint Augustine, "but it cannot resist the touch of your hand."<sup>3</sup> Cry out to God, then, for him to give you this gift, and deliver you from spiritual deadness; plead with him to remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. Give him no rest, and yourself no rest, until you see new life well-up within you. And do it, before it's too late, before you arrive at that dreadful place where Esau was, when he "found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears" (Heb. 12:16-17).

As the Lord reveals to the prophet Ezekiel, the gift of a new heart is God's saving solution to our sinful, sorry spiritual state. It's a costly gift, this gift of a new heart. Jesus Christ, God's one and only Son, had to die a murderous death on a Roman execution stake in order to purchase this gift. But now that it's been purchased by the precious blood of the Lamb, God the Father is free to give this gift to whomever asks for it by faith.

### **Guard Your Heart, Stir It Up**

It seems clear to me, however, that many of you do indeed have new hearts. If that's true of you, then you ought to rejoice! But you ought also *to guard this precious gift—guard it with your life*. "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be *hardened by the deceitfulness of sin*. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our confidence firm to the end" (Heb. 3:12-14). Beware of over-indulging in those short-lived, soul-deadening joys.

But, if you have a new heart, you should also strive to stir it up. Put yourself in the pathway of allurements. Take advantage of every means you have to expose yourself to the beauty of Jesus; lay hold of what are often called the 'means of grace,' those special God-designed

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 91.

channels through which the light and life and love of Christ most freely flows: like the Bible, meditation, prayer, corporate worship, preaching, Christian fellowship. While these are familiar to most, they're sadly neglected by many. Yet they're the proven method of stirring up the heart, stoking the affections of the soul for Christ, empowering you to live a life that is real, one that flows from the reality of the heart.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this message is really quite simple. It's to convince you, beyond any reasonable doubt, that the heart is at the heart of what it means to be real. If you want to be real, you need a new heart. If you're going to get real, you've got to get a new heart. The heart is the heart of real; you can't be real without it. And unless you have been given a new heart, you're ultimately going nowhere. But if you have the reality of a new heart within you, you know it's the source of purifying power for real, authentic Christian living.

I trust and pray, then, you're convinced of the centrality of the heart to what it means to be real, to authentic Christianity. So join me now in a final plea to Christ in prayer for the reality of a new heart, for the stirring up of our hearts:

*Come, O Lord, and stir our hearts. Call us back to yourself. Kindle your fire in us and carry us away. Let us scent your fragrance and taste your sweetness. Let us love you and hasten to your side.<sup>4</sup>*

Amen. Let it be, Lord Jesus! Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 163.