

# BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING

## 2

# RESTORED TO BE A BLESSING

## Ezekiel 36:16—38

By Rhodara Shreve

*“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*

Genesis 12:2—3  
God's promise to Abraham

*“What if we are the ones who have done evil, and we see the just consequences of evildoing coming on us? In this situation, God saves by judging...and then forgiving. So often the danger or evil we face is self-created, self-inflicted, self-sabotaging—and we keep doing it because we are self-deluded and self-deceived through denial. By judging our evil, by naming it for what it is, by penetrating our denial and self-delusion, God begins saving us.... salvation is what happens when we experience both judgment and forgiveness, both justice (exposing the truth about our wrong) and mercy (forgiving the negative consequences we deserve). Without both we don't end up with true salvation...We often refer to this saving judgment as God "convicting" us of our sin and our need for repentance. Again, without it there is no true salvation. Forgiveness without conviction is not forgiveness: it is irresponsible toleration. It doesn't lead to reconciliation and peace: it leads to chaos. (Ask any third-grade teacher who tolerates her rowdy students but never convicts them by naming and addressing their misbehavior). Conversely, judgment without mercy is not salvation, but condemnation. It doesn't lead to reconciliation and peace: it leads to alienation.”*

Brian McLaren

## AIM OF STUDY

- To understand God’s concern that His name be known among the nations, and that our true purpose in life is to glorify Him and spread His fame so that others will be reconciled to Him.

## KEY VERSE

“It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name....”

Ezekiel 36:22a

## PREPARATION

The authors suggest you read over the notes on “How to Teach the Bible in Small Group” and “Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual* if you feel your inductive study skills are rusty. Then, before you read over the Scripture text, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then read through the passage keeping an open heart and ear to the Lord. Finally, read through the Bible study below.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. **Therefore, use this Bible study as a framework for the discussion you lead in your small group meeting. This means, you will need to**

- Go over the questions and **choose** which ones you want to emphasize and which you will eliminate since your time is limited.
- Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (\*). Rather than leaving all of these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives.
- Pace yourself. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could **summarize** some of the passage and then go to the final questions.
- Select **one application question** you will use with your group at the end. The question may have more than one part, but the vital Biblical truth you want to encourage your group to put into practice should be the focus of your final question.
- Feel free to suggest that your group **continue** a discussion at the next meeting or at another informal get together. You want to leave time for worship, listening to God, and prayer ministry, so don’t feel you must cover every nugget of truth in a passage or allow each group member to share a mini-sermon on every question!
- Also, you may want to create your own introduction by using a personal example or current event that illustrates the point of the study. Your introduction and any background material shared should help lead the group members’ thoughts from the present moment into the text.

The authors are providing these questions and accompanying material for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to supply resources for possible

questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for further study.

## **PREPARATION RECOMMENDATION**

All leaders need to bring to the small group meeting resources listing opportunities to participate in or partner with the missions work of our church. If you already support or engage in missions work endorsed by our church, then you or someone in your group should bring current news from your missionary, along with a map, a list of prayer requests, information on how to support them financially, etc. If your group has not yet “adopted” some type of mission work, bring a list of our church’s short and long-term mission projects as well as ways to participate in them. You may find this information in a current issue of *The Mix*, our magazine, or on our website. For more specific details, contact the Administrative Assistant of the Missions Ministry.

## **OPENER**

It is a good idea to read this over and then try to summarize it in your own words as a springboard to your discussion. It can help you and your group know where you are heading. You can also just read it to the group and have them respond.

*The Purpose Driven Life*, written by Rick Warren, has enjoyed a spot in the Top 10 on the New York Bestseller List for some time now. Of course, there have been marketing efforts to capitalize on the book’s popularity through journals, videos, study guides, etc. Marketing is a very crucial part of “selling” the message, especially when something hits a nerve, but what drives the popularity of this book? Is it the “Christian” market or the “secular” market? In either case, could the reason for the book’s success be explained by the lack of purpose most people, including Christians, feel in their lives? If so, why is that? Why are we, as American Christians living in an affluent, well-educated, technologically advanced culture having such a hard time figuring out the purpose for which we exist? Should it really be that obscure to us as followers of Jesus Christ?

Ask the group what they think about the answer to these questions. Even if they haven’t read the book, take a quick survey and find out how many feel uncertain of what God’s purpose for them in life is right now. Let them discuss this briefly then transition to the purpose of the study.

This study in Ezekiel will help us rethink what God has in mind as an answer to the question of our life’s purpose. It will challenge us to consider what God is concerned about, and it may surprise us that His main concern isn’t us! This may seem a bit shocking for us, who are usually self-focused as much of modern culture is. Most of the time, we tend to think that we are the center of the universe, but maybe that’s because we are sorely lacking a perspective on life that starts with God. In this passage from Ezekiel 36:16–36, we will read about God’s concern for His reputation and His name among people who do not know Him.

We will also consider how His concern continues today, and what our role is in making Him known to the nations.

***Pray that the Holy Spirit will change our perception of life and purpose so that we can begin to live from a God-centered perspective instead of a self-centered one. Then ask for God's grace to live that way so that the nations will come to know Him.***

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

***This is background information for the leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.***

The book of Ezekiel is one of the prophetic books of the Old Testament. It is a long book that requires some knowledge of the history of Israel to really appreciate it. There are themes that get repeated over and over again from every angle, including “the certainty of God’s judgment, about His faithfulness to His promises, about the wages of sin, about national and individual righteousness, about forgiveness, about the role of God in history, about the communicator’s responsibility to proclaim God’s message steadily and consistently as the years go by and so on” (Stuart, p. 15). Ezekiel repeatedly spoke about the nation of Israel coming to an end, God’s judgments against other nations, and the future restoration of the true Israel—what we now call the church (Stuart, p. 17). Taylor notes that the phrase “know that I am the Lord” occurs more than fifty times, indicating “...Ezekiel’s consuming passion,” that is, God’s priority of making Himself known to humans (Taylor, p. 23).

Ezekiel lived 2600 years ago during the time that the Babylonian Empire had subdued the nation of Judah and destroyed Jerusalem, the capital city, and its temple. (This would have been like a foreign nation conquering America, destroying Washington, D. C. and every church in the nation.) The Assyrian Empire had already attacked the northern part of the nation, called Israel. The Babylonians deported the Jews three times to Mesopotamia. Ezekiel was captured during the second of the three, in 598 B.C. Jerusalem had been under siege for 2 years, culminating in the fall of Judah, the southern portion of the former nation of Israel. Israel was never again an independent nation, until the secular state was formed in 1948. A foreign empire dominated the land from then on. This was the time when the splendor of Israel was passing away but a time when God would speak to them very clearly about their future (Stuart, p. 17). Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry lasted twenty-two years. We don’t know much more about Ezekiel except that he was a priest, the son of a priest (Ezekiel 1:3), and that he was married until his wife died while they were in exile. We also know that the elders of Israel sought him out and consulted him on important matters pertaining to the community of exiles (Stuart, p. 18).

## **STUDY THE PASSAGE: Ezekiel 36:16–38**

### **Part One: Ezekiel 36:16–24**

- 1. Would someone please read Ezekiel 36:16–21, and someone else read verses 22–24 aloud for us?**

## What does it mean to “defile” something (v. 17)?

To “defile” means: “to make unclean or impure; to corrupt the purity or perfection of; to violate the chastity of; to make physically unclean especially with something unpleasant or contaminating” (“defile,” M-W online). The difference between *defile* and *profane* (vv. 20–23) is very slight. To defile is to pollute something that is clean. To profane is to treat in an unholy manner something that is sacred (“profane,” M-W online). Don’t belabor this point.

## 2. What did Israel defile, and how did that happen (v. 17)?

It might help to summarize what has been happening in Israel. There has been some very serious sin going on in the nation.

- The princes of Israel were using their power to shed blood (22:6).
- They were oppressing the poor, the alien, and mistreating the fatherless and the widow (22:7, 29).
- They had desecrated the Sabbath (22:8).
- They were doing sexually lewd things and violating women (22:9–11).
- They were acting as mercenaries and accepting bribes to murder people (22:12).
- They were charging excessive interest and practicing extortion—getting money by threats (22:12).
- They were sacrificing their sons and daughters to idols (16:20, 20:26, 22:31).
- They had built idols in the temple and in their own homes (20:16).
- They had killed many people in the city (11:5–6).
- There were false prophets telling them things that were not from God (13:1–4).
- They were not encouraging the wicked to turn from their ways.
- They practiced divination (13:22).
- And worst of all, they had forgotten God (22:12).

Notice how specific God is in his judgments. This is not an impulsive reaction by someone who does not know why He is angry or for what reason.

### \*Are we offending God or defiling our country in any similar ways?

Don’t get off onto a major analysis of our nation, politics, culture, etc. The real focus should be on the next question.

### \*How might this impact the impression other nations have of Christians?

Note: While our church does not equate American government or goals with Biblical Christianity, some nations view us as a Christian culture since many of our founders shared Christian values. Thus some other cultures tend to see our contemporary lifestyle, media, values, etc. as the products of Christianity. When they see widespread immorality, they often dismiss Christianity and look elsewhere for spiritual answers.

### 3. What was God's action in light of their conduct (vv. 18–19)?

God judged the nation by dispersing them among the nations. This refers to both the Assyrian and Babylonian nations conquering and deporting the Jews.

#### **\*When the Scripture speaks about the wrath of God, do you consider that to be a just and appropriate response from God towards sin? Why or why not?**

Popular opinion in our country often states that the God of the Old Testament was a God of wrath, but the God of the New Testament is always full of love and wouldn't judge or punish. But the Bible doesn't support this truism. The God of the Old Testament [Covenant] is the same as the New (James 1:17; Hebrews 13:8). This question has to be answered by starting with the holiness of God and His absolute right to rule and judge over humans because He is the Creator and owner of us all (Genesis 1:1–2:2; Deuteronomy 10:14; Nehemiah 9:6; Psalm 24:1–2; 50:10; Psalm 104; Isaiah 40:28, 46:10; 54:5; Matthew 25:31–32; Acts 17:24–31; Revelation 20:11–15).

Yes, God demonstrated His great love by sending Jesus to die in our place for our sins when we failed to keep our portion of the Old Covenant relationship. But God was not a vindictive legalist in the Old Testament period. He set up laws and ceremonies to express His holiness and to help His people respect and reflect that (Leviticus 20:7–8, 26, 22:31–33). Knowing that humans would not live up to His standards, He also provided a way to remove our guilt and pay for our offenses against Him. Otherwise humans would have remained estranged from Him, losing out on the eternal benefits of His presence and favor. A major thrust of the sacramental system spelled out in Exodus through Deuteronomy was that God would allow His people to substitute certain animals as payment for their sins (Leviticus 16:1–34, 17:11). In some situations in which humans had broken His laws and had been sentenced with the death penalty, God would allow the shedding of animal blood to represent the required death and cleansing of that sin from the person, people, or land (Leviticus 17:11; Hebrews 9:22). God always meant for His people to bring sacrifices or offerings in faith, not earning forgiveness, but trusting Him for a just and merciful response. The Bible tells us that these sacrifices were temporary and external, symbolic of the need to remove our sin. They pointed forward to the real cleansing of sin by faith in the future sacrifice of Jesus (Hebrews 9:1–13, 10:1–18).

When Jesus died as a sacrifice for sin in our place, God poured out His wrath against our sin onto Jesus (Romans 3:23–25; 1 John 4:10). Thus we can't say that the God of the New Testament is not the same God who demanded a penalty for offending His holiness. Jesus, Himself, spoke more times on judgment than He did love, since in His compassion for us, He wanted us to recognize our need for forgiveness, turn from offending God, and put our faith in the means God provided to do away with the penalty of sin (Hebrews 10:10–20). Thus the mercy of God is seen in the Old Testament sacrificial system, and the wrath of God is evident in Jesus' death in our place. And the Bible clearly states that this is God's view of love. "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might

live through him. This is love: not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:9–10).

**4. God’s judgment against Israel got a reaction from the other nations who were watching her. What were they saying (v. 20)?**

Many ancient peoples believed that certain gods ruled in specific geographical areas. So they associated the Hebrews’ God with the land they lived in. The pagan nations, watching as invading nations sent God’s people into exile again and again, got the wrong idea. They thought that Israel’s God was not very powerful since He seemingly couldn’t prevent the defeat of the nation He was supposed to watch over.

**5. What concerned God when the nations thought He was not powerful enough to protect His people in their own land (v. 21)? What does it mean to “profane” a name?**

As in most of this book, God is concerned that His name, His reputation, would be holy and honored. Be sure that your group members understand what is meant by the Lord’s **name**. In the Bible, a name is not just the label for identifying a person. It also “...reveals the true nature of its bearer (1 Samuel 25:25) so that to know the name is to know the person... or ...designates the relationship that exists between entities, especially between God and His people (2 Chronicles 7:14; Isaiah 43:6f)” (Hawthorne, pp. 481–483). God’s name represents all the qualities of His perfection, His holiness, His love, His goodness, His mercy, His power, His wisdom, His sovereign rule, etc.

“Once again Ezekiel repeats his assertion that Israel’s sins deserved God’s punishment. The people had defiled their land and made it unclean.... For this God had scattered them among the nations and judged them: He could do no other. Then, however, His act of judgment had rebounded upon His own good name, for the heathen had been astonished that such a fate should happen to the people of the Lord and **it had caused them to think lightly of a God who allowed His people to be treated so.**

“The doctrine expressed in the phrase, *I had concern for my holy name* (v.21) represents the utmost humiliation for the sinner. There is no consideration for him (the sinner), no respect for his feelings, no love for him as a human being. He stands condemned because of his sins, and he forfeits all claim on God. He is simply a pawn on the chessboard of the world, in which **God’s prime concern is that all men and nations may know He is the Lord.** To put it like this in all its starkness may seem a bit harsh and a contradiction of Christianity, but it is an aspect of the truth God has revealed in the Old Testament. It is this aspect which is basic to Paul’s statement in Romans 5:8, “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” We had no claim on God, we were His enemies, we were helpless to do anything to save ourselves: but God acted in salvation. In doing so, He showed His love to us, and to all the world. But the humiliation of Ezekiel’s doctrine is needed first, in order that we may

appreciate the amazing grace of Romans 5” (emphasis added, Taylor, pp. 230–231).

Five times in four verses (vv. 20, 21, 22, 23), God mentions that Israel has profaned His name. Thus, we know this is of great concern to the Lord! To profane is “to treat (something sacred) with abuse, irreverence, or contempt” (“profane,” M-W online).

**\*Does God’s concern for His name surprise you? Is this a new concept for you to consider?**

**6. What was God going to do to restore the honor of His name (vv. 22–24)? What group of people does He seem more concerned about than Israel?**

**\*How have you shared God’s concern that the nations know that He is the Lord?**

### **Part Two: Ezekiel 36: 24–38**

Earlier in the book, Ezekiel had delivered messages about Israel’s long history of sin (Stuart, p. 19). In the first chapters of Ezekiel, God diagnosed the root of the problem. In Chapter 3:7, God said to Ezekiel, “But the house of Israel is not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for the whole house of Israel is hardened and obstinate.” In Chapters 34–37, God provides the solution. In Chapters 34–37, we read of how God intends to resolve the problem of Israel’s sin. The only way for Him to overcome the problem is “...to revive His people... by a spiritual renewal of their hearts, and, next, by an external prosperity.... The result is that the... [unbeliever sees] the power and goodness of God... towards...[His] people.... The external restoration is preceded by an internal one...a radical renewal of the heart...” (Jamieson, Fausset & Brown).

**7. Will someone read Ezekiel 36: 24–32 and someone verses 33–38? In these verses, there are many instances where the phrase “I will” is used to indicate what God will do for Israel. What “will” God do?**

You can have people identify these from the text, and then ask them to summarize these actions in their own words. I.e. Israel is separated out, they are cleansed from sin, they are given a new heart, and they are given blessing and increase. Here are the “I will’s”:

- Take you out of the nations.
- Gather you from the countries.
- Sprinkle clean water on you.
- Cleanse you from your impurities.
- Give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.
- Remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh [see below].
- Put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees.
- Be your God.
- Save you from all your uncleanness.

- Call for the grain and make it plentiful and not bring famine upon you.
- Increase the fruit of the trees and crops of the field.
- Increase their population, which probably will include some from outside Israel (the nations) coming to join the people of God (vv. 37–38).

*Note:* The “heart” and the “spirit” do not refer to specific parts of a person but to one’s personality. The “heart” includes the mind, will, and emotions, the core of the person. The “spirit” is what motivates or drives the person’s thoughts, feelings, and actions (Taylor, p. 232). The contrast between the “heart of stone” and the “heart of flesh” here is not a condemnation of the body, or “the carnal flesh.” The “heart of stone” refers to a heart that is unimpressible in serious things (Taylor, p. 232), like the stony ground in Matthew 13:5 and 20 which was unfit to receive the good seed. Ezekiel warns against letting our hearts become hardened to God (Hebrews 3:7–13).

Man cannot gain a new heart unless God gives it. So Ezekiel goes on to explain that the Lord will remove the hard, rebellious heart and give His people soft, receptive, “fleshly” hearts. And, in order to be a living heart, He will put His Spirit in His people. This change of heart and change of spirit will help God’s people live in right relationship with Him thus fulfilling the covenant begun with Abraham. The holy life is the exchanged life (Galatians 2:20, 5:16–26). We cannot live the Christian life apart from the Holy Spirit even while we are told to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12–13). This is the mystery of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility.

The language of verse 25 reminds one of the ceremonial cleansing required in rituals Israel’s priests performed when someone had been defiled (Exodus 30:17–21; Leviticus 14:52; Numbers 19:17–19, cited in Taylor, p. 231). Notice how important it is to be “clean.” The New Testament reveals the fulfillment of God’s action to cleanse Israel internally. Along with receiving forgiveness, we can be cleansed from our sins when we confess our sin and put our faith in Christ (1 John 1:7, 9). Some of the passages which highlight this truth: Hebrews 9:11–12, 14; 10:19–20, 22; and Titus 3:5–7.

- 8. When God has transformed His people, how will Israel respond to His extravagant acts of grace (v. 31)?**
- 9. In verses 32–36, God again makes a very clear statement of His motivation. What is the reason for God’s actions of grace and restoration?**

**10. What final blessing does the Lord promise (vv. 37–38)?**

**\*When have you seen the Lord increase the number of people groups He wants to make Himself known to?**

**APPLICATION**

**\*As God restores our lives, what should our response to Him be? Why are our responses important to the way God is working out His purposes on earth?**

**\*If God was concerned about what the nations thought of Himself in Ezekiel's day, do you think He still has that concern? Why?**

**\*How can our group spread the honor of God's name to the nations? Do we have to travel overseas? While some in our group may do that, what other options exist?**

**\*In the next few weeks, we want to put what we've learned into action. Let's select one way our group can increase God's honor to people from another nation.**

Remember: All leaders need to bring resources to the meeting, which list ways to participate in the missions' work of our church. You may find a listing in the current issue of *The Mix*, our monthly magazine, or on the church's website. For more specific information, contact the Missions Ministry staff at church. If you already have people in your group involved in a short-term missions team or partnering with one of the missionaries supported by our church, then you could consider adopting that work as a group.

There are many ways to be involved: going on a short term missions trip; praying for and supporting those who are going overseas; helping with practical logistics for our missionaries; befriending international students and participating in International Friendships ministries; etc.

## WRAPPING IT UP

In this study, our purpose in life begins to be defined by the *glory* of God's holiness and the sacredness of *His* name, instead of our own. *It becomes our purpose to spread the greatness of God's reputation throughout the whole earth.* God does care about what others think of Him. In fact, our behavior and how we choose to live our lives is linked to what is at stake in this grand plan of redemption and salvation. We cannot say things *about* God and act as if it does not matter to Him how we live. It does. The Israelites experienced God's judgment upon them because they thought it didn't. This should sober us and keep us dependent upon God to fulfill *His* purposes in us and through us.

Our purpose in life is forever bound up with God's. Even though we may feel small or insignificant, or make the error of over-exaggerating our own greatness, we can come back to the truth that says we are part of a larger story being written everyday and for all eternity. *We are being restored to be a blessing so that His name will spread to all the nations and be honored by them.*

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