

The LORD Is There

Exile, Glory, and the God Who Comes Back: A Study of Ezekiel

Session 12. A New Heart

Reading: Ezekiel 36:16-38

Part One

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim

The group discovers that God's answer to the whole problem of the book is not better behaviour but a transplant: clean water, a new heart, and his own Spirit placed within, and they open the sealed guesses against that promise.

Catholic Touchstone

Grace precedes and produces conversion: God gives what he commands, and the Church receives this promise concretely in baptism, confirmation, and ongoing conversion, where water and the Spirit act together as one divine gift.

This is the summit night. Everything the study has built converges here: the heart of stone planted in session 4, the impossible command of chapter 18, the 'for my name's sake' logic of chapter 20, and the sealed envelope from session 1. Ezekiel 36:16-38 explains why God restores (his own holy name) and how (not repair but replacement: water, heart, Spirit). Two things must land tonight. First, the grammar: God is the subject of nearly every verb, and Israel's obedience appears only after the Spirit is given. Second, the envelope: opened after the group has found verses 26-27, never before, so that the text answers the guesses rather than the guesses steering the text. Protect time for both. This session repays every week the group has invested; let them feel it.

What You Need to Know

Where we stand in the book

Since the hinge of chapter 33, Ezekiel's message has turned from demolition to rebuilding. Chapters 34 to 37 are the heart of the restoration oracles, and 36:16-38 is their engine room. The exiles hearing this have just absorbed the news that Jerusalem has fallen exactly as the dated word said it would. Every scaffold of national religion (land, temple, king) is gone. Into that emptiness God speaks a promise that asks nothing of them first.

The scandal of the name

Verses 16-21 name the wound the rescue must heal, and it is not primarily Israel's suffering. Wherever the exiles went, the nations drew the obvious conclusion: these are the LORD's people, and they had to leave his land, so their God must have failed. The exile has made God look beaten. The group met this logic in chapter 20 (session 8); tonight it becomes the foundation stone of the promises. Do not soften the double 'not for your sake' in verses 22 and 32; the whole chapter leans on it.

The grammar of grace

Walk verses 24-28 yourself before the session and count the first person verbs: I will take, gather, bring, sprinkle, cleanse, give, put, cause. Israel's only action, walking in the statutes, appears in verse 27 as the result of God's Spirit placed within. Set this against 18:31, where God commanded, get yourselves a new heart, and against 11:19, where he first whispered the promise. The command has become a gift. That

resolution of a tension the group has carried since session 7 is the night's central discovery; let them find the verbs themselves in question 3.

Water, Spirit, and the font

Ezekiel is a priest, and in verses 17-18 he reaches for a priest's categories of uncleanness; in verse 25 he reaches for a priest's remedy, sprinkled water (compare the purification water of Numbers 19). The Church proclaims this very passage at the Easter Vigil, the great night of baptisms, and has always heard 36:25-27 fulfilled in baptism and confirmation. Do not hand this to the group in advance; the discovery moment in question 5 lets them find the New Testament landing themselves, and the steelman in question 6 lets them test it.

A pastoral note on verse 31

The phrase 'loathe yourselves' can land hard in a mixed room, especially on anyone who struggles with shame or scrupulosity. The Hebrew idiom expresses profound contrition, not a command to self-hatred, and the order of the chapter is decisive: cleansing and the new heart come first, and remembering comes after, as the fruit of a heart that can finally feel. Contrition turns toward God; self-hatred turns inward and away. Question 7 handles this directly; give it room and do not rush anyone toward resolution.

Tonight's envelope

Bring the sealed envelope from session 1. Decide beforehand whether guesses will be read anonymously (recommended) or claimed by their writers. The ritual sits at question 8, after the group has discovered the transplant verses, so the text is already on the table when the guesses meet it. Resolve honestly: some guesses will hit the center tonight, and some are still waiting for their moment, because the book is not finished. Do not close any guess out.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Sinai surpassed

At Sinai the law was inscribed on tablets of stone, though even there the Torah asks for love and calls the word near, in the mouth and in the heart (Deuteronomy 6:5; 30:14). Here the inscribing itself moves inside, and God does it: a heart of flesh and the Spirit himself causing obedience. Jeremiah 31:31-34 is the twin oracle, promising a new covenant with the law written on hearts; Ezekiel supplies the how, God's own *ruach* placed within. Verse 28 seals it with the covenant formula the group met in chapter 16: you shall be my people, and I will be your God. Verse 28 carries the covenant formula; Ezekiel's everlasting covenant language itself comes at 16:60 and 37:26.

A priest's vocabulary

The sprinkling of verse 25 evokes the purification rites of Numbers 19, where water was sprinkled on the defiled so they could re-enter the camp and the sanctuary. Ezekiel the priest is saying: the whole people is defiled beyond any human rite, so God himself will perform the priestly cleansing no earthly priest could.

Back to Eden

Verse 35: the desolate land will become like the garden of Eden, and the nations will see it. This is not renovation but re-creation. The Bible's whole arc runs from a garden lost to a garden restored, with God dwelling among his people, and Ezekiel places this passage on that arc deliberately.

Fulfillment

The Church reads 36:25-27 as fulfilled in baptism (water and the Spirit as one birth), in confirmation (the Messiah's Spirit poured out on the whole messianic people, CCC 1287), and in the ongoing conversion of the baptized (CCC 1432). Jesus' night conversation with Nicodemus assumes that a teacher of Israel should already recognize this promise; the group finds that landing themselves in question 5, so keep it out of your framing until then.

Voices of the Church

Read these aloud where they land. Each is either a direct citation or an honest summary, labelled as such.

St. Augustine of Hippo, d. 430

You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.

Confessions I.1.1.

For the group. The heart of stone is, among other things, a restless heart. Tonight God promises not to polish the stone but to replace it with a heart that can finally rest in him.

St. Athanasius of Alexandria, d. 373

St. Athanasius teaches, in substance, that God saves his people not because they have earned rescue but because it would be unworthy of his own goodness to let the work of his hands be ruined. God's faithfulness to his own goodness, and so to his own name, is on this account the surest ground of our hope, not the shakiest.

On the Incarnation. Summary of his teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. For anyone stung by 'not for your sake ... but for the sake of my holy name': Athanasius shows why that sentence is the best news in the chapter. A rescue anchored in God's own character cannot fail the way a rescue anchored in our performance would.

St. Ambrose of Milan, d. 397

St. Ambrose teaches, in substance, that the water of the font does nothing by itself: it is the presence and power of the Holy Spirit that makes the water cleanse and give new life, so the newly baptized should not see mere water but God at work.

On the Mysteries. Summary of his teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. This is Ezekiel 36:25-27 in one breath: sprinkled water and indwelling Spirit as a single divine act. It is also what the Church means by a sacrament: not our ritual reaching up, but God's action reaching down through a sign he chose.

Catechism Connection

The Catechism says

CCC 715. The prophetic texts about the sending of the Spirit are promises spoken to the heart of God's people, promising a new heart and God's own Spirit placed within; the Catechism names Ezekiel among these oracles.

CCC 1287. The Messiah's fullness of the Spirit was never meant for him alone: it was to be poured out on the whole messianic people, as the prophets promised. This grounds confirmation.

CCC 1432. The human heart is heavy and hardened; God must give us a new heart. Conversion is first of all a work of God's grace, which makes our hearts return to him.

CCC 694. In baptism, water signifies the Holy Spirit's action: our birth into the divine life is given in the Holy Spirit,

and we are born of water and the Spirit.

Thread Watch

Thread Watch

The heart of stone (resolve). Planted at 11:19 in session 4, sharpened by the command of 18:31 in session 7, developed ever since. Tonight it resolves: verse 26 turns the command into a gift. Name the resolution explicitly in question 4 so the group feels the payoff of eight weeks of tracking.

Sealed guess (resolve). Open the envelope at question 8, after verses 26-27 are on the table. Read every guess with respect. Tonight's answer is 'within you', but do not close out guesses naming the temple or the city; the book has three more movements, and some guesses may prove truer than they look tonight. Say exactly that.

The everlasting covenant (develop). Verse 28 repeats the covenant formula from chapter 16: you shall be my people, and I will be your God. One line connecting back to the foundling bride is enough.

The LORD is there (develop). Leader only: 'within you' is the penultimate answer to where God dwells, not the final one. The glory returns in chapter 43 and the city gets its name at 48:35. Reveal nothing; just keep the question alive by saying the book is not done answering it.

Follow the glory (develop). Lightly. God's vindication of his name before the nations (36:23, 36) is the pressure that will eventually bring the glory home. Do not say where or how; sessions 15 and 16 carry that discovery.

Son of man (rest). The address appears in verse 17 as usual; no development tonight. The transplant and the envelope need the air in the room.

Objection Bench

Leader only. Do not raise these unless someone in the room does.

Verse 27 says God will cause us to walk in his statutes. Doesn't that erase free will and make us puppets?

The Church rejects both errors here: Pelagianism (we do it ourselves) and determinism (God does it instead of us). Grace is not a rival to freedom; God moves the will from within as its Maker, the way a spring moves water, not the way a hand moves a puppet (CCC 1742). Sin gravely wounds and enslaves freedom; it does not abolish it. Grace heals that freedom, liberates it, and makes supernatural obedience possible. The Spirit's causing is what makes free obedience possible at all.

If baptism really gives the new heart, why do baptized people still sin, sometimes gravely?

Baptism truly regenerates, but it does not abolish the frailty of human nature or the inclination to sin that tradition calls concupiscence (CCC 1426). The transplant is real and the gift must still be lived, fed, and, when wounded, healed; that is why the Church pairs the font with the confessional and why conversion is the work of a lifetime (CCC 1432).

Session Goals

1. The group states in their own words, from verses 16-23, why God acts for the sake of his own name, and why that is good news rather than an insult.

2. The group counts the divine verbs of verses 24-28 and concludes for themselves that the new heart is gift before it is demand.
3. The group finds the New Testament landing of water and Spirit without being told where to look.
4. The sealed guesses from session 1 are opened, read with respect, and weighed honestly against verses 26-28, with unresolved guesses explicitly kept open.
5. Everyone leaves with one concrete way to live their baptism this week.

Time Note

Planned for 75 to 90 minutes

In a 90 minute room: opening prayer and Win, 12 minutes; reading with pencil marks, 10; Build questions 1 to 7, about 40; the envelope (question 8), a protected 10; questions 9 and 10, 8; Send, Live It, memory verse and closing prayer, 10. In a 75 minute room apply the cuts below and guard the envelope's 10 minutes above everything except the transplant verses themselves.

If you are running long, cut in this order.

1. Cut question 9 (Eden) first; fold its single point into your framing of question 10.
2. Cut both Dig Deeper boxes next.
3. If still tight, shorten question 2 to one exchange and let the St. Athanasius voice carry the 'for my name's sake' point on the Take-Home.

Part Two

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Pray together

Father, you see us as we are: hearts that have tried and failed, hearts that have grown tired, hearts that have gone hard in places we do not like to look. Tonight you speak a promise you have been preparing for this whole book. Send your Holy Spirit into this room as we open your word. Give us ears to hear what you want to give, and the honesty to admit we cannot give it to ourselves. We ask it through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win

Open questions. No wrong answers. Let everyone speak before you move on.

W1. What is a habit you have tried to change by sheer willpower? How far did willpower get you?

W2. Tell us about something you, or someone you know, tried to fix over and over before finally admitting it needed to be replaced. How did you know?

Keep both light. The second one quietly plants the replace-not-repair image the whole night will pay off; do not explain that yet.

Read

Read aloud

Three readers: 36:16-21, 36:22-32, 36:33-38. Before reading, hand out pencils and ask everyone to put a small mark beside every 'I will' they hear. Read slowly; the marks matter later.

Build

Numbered inductive questions. Ask, wait, let the group work the text. The ANSWER boxes are for you to share after the discussion, not before it.

The wound God names

1. Before God announces any rescue, what problem does he name in verses 16-21? Whose reputation is at stake, and how did it get there?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Israel defiled the land and was scattered for it, but the deeper wound is in verse 20: wherever they went, they profaned God's holy name, because the nations drew the obvious conclusion. These are the people of the LORD, and they had to leave his land, so their God must have failed. The exile has made God look defeated. Whatever rescue comes must heal Israel and vindicate God's name before the watching world, both at once.

2. God says it twice, in verse 22 and again in verse 32: not for your sake. First reaction, honestly: does that sound cold? Now look again, remembering chapter 20. What does 'for my holy name's sake' actually secure?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

It stings for a moment, and then it liberates. If the rescue rested on Israel's deserving, it would collapse the instant they failed again, and chapter 36 has just catalogued their failures. Because it rests on God's own name, it is exactly as unbreakable as God. We met this logic in chapter 20; tonight it stops being a pattern in Israel's history and becomes the foundation under the biggest promises in the book. The least flattering sentence in the chapter is the most secure thing in it.

Dig Deeper

The first petition of the Our Father, hallowed be thy name, is a prayer for verse 23 to come true in us: that God's name would be shown holy through his people before the nations. The Catechism's treatment of this petition (CCC 2807-2815) is worth an evening on its own; connecting it to Ezekiel 36 is our observation, but it is hard to unsee once seen.

The transplant

3. Now use your pencil marks. Walk through verses 24-28 and count: how many times is God the one acting? And what, precisely, is left for Israel to do, and when does their part appear?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. Count the 'I will' statements out loud together and just let the total sit in the room.

Ground. Notice that verse 27 does not remove the statutes; it makes keeping them possible. God does not lower the standard, he changes the walker.

Depth. This is the biblical root of the Church's whole theology of grace: God's action does not replace ours, it creates ours. Question 4 will give it a name.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

I will take, I will gather, I will bring, I will sprinkle, I will cleanse, I will give, I will put, I will cause. Depending on how you count, eight or more first person actions, and Israel is the object of every one. Their walking in the statutes appears only in verse 27, after and because God's Spirit is placed within: and cause you to walk. The obedience this book has demanded since chapter 18 is finally given as a gift. Grace comes first and produces obedience; obedience does not come first and earn grace.

Dig Deeper

Jeremiah, Ezekiel's contemporary, received the twin oracle: a new covenant with the law written on hearts. Send an interested pair to Jeremiah 31:31-34 this week and ask them to report back on what Jeremiah promises that Ezekiel assumes, and what Ezekiel explains that Jeremiah leaves mysterious.

4. In 18:31 God commanded: get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Here in 36:26 he promises: a new heart I will give you. And back in 11:19 he first whispered this same promise. What has changed

between the command and the gift? And what is the difference between a heart of stone and a heart of flesh?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Nothing has changed in Israel; something is revealed in God. What he commands, he himself gives. St. Augustine turned this into a prayer: give what you command, and command what you will (Confessions X.29.40). Stone is dead, cold, unresponsive; you can strike it and it feels nothing. Flesh is alive, warm, woundable, able to be moved. God's answer to the whole problem of this book is not a demand to try harder but a transplant. And with that, the heart of stone we have tracked since chapter 11 finally resolves: the surgeon has announced the operation.

Live discovery

Group one: read John 3:1-8 and answer this: why is Jesus surprised that this particular listener does not understand being born of water and the Spirit? Group two: read Hebrews 10:22 and list the two things happening in that verse, one to the heart and one to the body. Then report back.

Let them find it. John 3:1-8; Hebrews 10:22

5. Somebody in Israel read these verses for centuries and waited for them to come true. Where does the New Testament pick up this exact promise of water and Spirit making a person new? Split into two groups and go find it.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Group one: Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a teacher of Israel, and many interpreters hear Ezekiel 36 behind his rebuke: water and Spirit together, making a person new from the inside. 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?' Group two: Hebrews 10:22 pairs hearts sprinkled clean with bodies washed with pure water, inner reality and outward washing named in one breath. Ezekiel's sprinkling has an address in Christian life, and the Church has always read it as baptism. In fact this very passage of Ezekiel is appointed among the Old Testament readings of the Easter Vigil, the great night of baptisms.

6. Let's take the strongest version of the objection to what we just found, and take it seriously before we answer it.

Build then press

The strongest form of the objection. Reading baptism into Ezekiel 36 gets the prophet exactly backwards. The sprinkled water in verse 25 is a metaphor for inner cleansing, precisely parallel to the new heart, and nobody thinks the new heart is a literal organ. The New Testament's weight falls on faith: Abraham was counted righteous before any rite, and Paul insists we are justified by faith apart from works. Baptism is the outward sign of an inward grace already received by faith; it testifies to the new birth, it does not cause it. Making a water ritual the instrument of regeneration risks repeating the very disease Ezekiel spent his whole book diagnosing: trusting the temple, the ritual, the whitewash, instead of the interior reality only God can give.

Answering from the text. Feel the weight of that; it is a serious reading, and its instinct is one Ezekiel shares: God is not impressed by rituals emptied of himself. But look at what the text actually joins. The sprinkling in verse 25 is not Israel's ritual reaching up to God; it is God's own action reaching down: I will sprinkle. It stands in a single unbroken chain of divine verbs with I will give you a new heart and I will put my Spirit within you. Ezekiel's cure

for empty ritual is not ritual removed but ritual filled with God. And that is exactly how Jesus lands it: to Nicodemus he does not say born of faith alone, he says born of water and the Spirit, one birth with two named elements, and Hebrews keeps them together, hearts sprinkled and bodies washed. Here is the deep logic: a sacrament in which God is the actor is the opposite of works righteousness. The infant at the font contributes nothing, which is Ezekiel 36 in miniature: I will sprinkle, I will give, I will put. And the Church agrees with the objection's best instinct more than it expects: baptism is not magic, it calls for faith and must be lived in ongoing conversion, or it becomes the whitewash of chapter 13. But the gift itself is God's act, not our testimony about ourselves.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The objection rightly refuses to trust empty ritual, and Ezekiel agrees. But verse 25's sprinkling is God's action, not ours, welded into one chain with the new heart and the Spirit. The New Testament keeps water and Spirit together in one birth, and hearts sprinkled with bodies washed. A sacrament where God is the actor is grace, not works: the strongest possible protection against the whitewash Ezekiel condemned. What baptism asks of us afterwards is faith and a lived conversion, which is where verse 27's walking comes in.

After the gift

7. Notice the order of the chapter: cleansing, new heart, and Spirit come first (25-27), and only then, in verse 31, you will remember your evil ways. Why that order? And what is verse 31 asking for, and what is it not asking for?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Real contrition is a fruit of mercy, not its price. A heart of stone feels nothing; only the new heart of flesh can look honestly at the past and grieve it, which is why the remembering comes after the transplant. The strong language of verse 31 is the idiom of deep contrition, not a command to self-hatred: God has just promised to cleanse, renew, and rebuild these very people, and verse 32's call to shame serves the humility that keeps the gift a gift. Contrition turns toward God and ends in love; self-hatred turns inward and ends in despair. The person who has been forgiven much remembers truthfully, and loves much. The Catechism says it plainly: conversion is first of all God's grace making our hearts return to him (CCC 1432).

The envelope

8. Eleven weeks ago, on the night Ezekiel saw the glory of God in Babylon, each of us wrote one sentence: by the end of this book, where do you think God will choose to dwell? Open the envelope now. Read each guess aloud, without names unless the writer wants to claim it, and list them where everyone can see. Then read verses 26-28 aloud one more time, and answer together: where has God just said he will dwell? Which guesses came closest tonight, and which might still be waiting for their moment?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Tonight the book gives its most intimate answer: within you. Not first in a rebuilt building, not on a mountain, but inside cleansed people carrying God's own Spirit, closer than the temple ever was. Guesses like 'in our hearts', 'in his people', 'with the exiles wherever they are' hit the center of tonight's text, and their writers should hear that. But be honest with the room: guesses that named the temple, or Jerusalem, or the land are not simply wrong, and no one's guess is closed out tonight. This book has three more movements, and some guesses may prove truer than they look

right now. Keep the list; we will finish weighing it on our last night together.

9. Look at verse 35. What single word there tells you the scale of what God intends, and why does it matter that the nations will see it (verse 36)?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Eden. Not repair, not renovation, but re-creation: the desolate land becomes like the garden where the story began. God's endgame has never been merely getting Israel back to normal; it is getting creation back to Eden, with God dwelling among his people. And the nations watching (verse 36) closes the loop opened in verse 20: the same watching world that concluded God had failed will watch him rebuild, and know that the LORD has spoken and done it.

10. For twenty chapters God refused to be consulted by his unrepentant people (remember 20:3: I will not be inquired of by you). What changes in verse 37, and what does it teach us about prayer?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The God who shut the door to inquiry now opens it: this also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them. Even the asking is part of the gift. Prayer does not inform God of anything or talk him into generosity; it is the way he has chosen to give what he has already promised, so that we are drawn inside the giving instead of standing outside it. And the last image (verse 38, a flock of men filling the ruined cities) quietly reaches back to chapter 34: the Shepherd who promised to gather his sheep is filling his fold.

Send

Open questions. Let these land in silence if they need to.

S1. Where in your life have you been chiselling away at the stone, when what God is offering is a transplant?

S2. Most of us were baptized once, with water at a font, maybe before we can remember. What would change this week if you believed verse 27 was a present tense description of you?

Live It This Week

Practices

1. **Holy water, slowly.** Every time you enter a church this week, take the holy water deliberately, not on autopilot, and say to yourself: the cleansing Ezekiel promised is fulfilled here, in water and the Spirit. Let the sign preach to you.
2. **Go to Confession.** The Catechism says conversion is first of all God's grace giving a new heart (CCC 1432), and this is the sacrament where the transplant is tended for the rest of your life. If it has been a while, this is the week.
3. **Pray Psalm 51:10 each morning:** create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. One line, every day, before your feet hit the floor.
4. **Find your baptism date.** Ask a parent or your parish if you do not know it, and put it in your calendar as an annual feast. It is the day Baptism sacramentally applied to you the cleansing and the gift of the Spirit that Ezekiel

36:25-27 promises.

Scripture Memory

Ezekiel 36:26

"A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

Ezekiel 36:26

Closing Prayer

Pray together

Lord God, you promised through your prophet that you would sprinkle clean water on your people, give them a new heart, and put your own Spirit within them. You have kept that promise to us at the font, and you keep it still. Take out of us whatever has hardened. Give us hearts of flesh that can feel what you feel, grieve what wounds you, and love what you love. Cause us to walk in your ways, since we cannot walk them alone. And as we come near the end of this book, keep our eyes open for where your glory goes next. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Part Three

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order. Print this page and keep it in front of you.

Primary text

- **Ezekiel 36:16-38**

Echoes within Ezekiel

- **Ezekiel 11:19** the promise first whispered, session 4
- **Ezekiel 18:31** the command that becomes tonight's gift, session 7
- **Ezekiel 20:3** inquiry refused, reversed at 36:37
- **Ezekiel 34:31** the flock of the Shepherd, echoed at 36:38

Old Testament roots

- **Numbers 19:17-19** priestly sprinkling for the defiled
- **Jeremiah 31:31-34** the twin oracle, Dig Deeper

Discovery passages

- **John 3:1-8** born of water and the Spirit
- **Hebrews 10:22** hearts sprinkled, bodies washed

Live It This Week

- **Psalm 51:10** daily prayer

Terms

- ****lev.**** heart: in Hebrew, the seat of thinking, willing, and deciding, not just feeling
- ****ruach.**** spirit, breath, wind: the one word carries all three, and Ezekiel trades on it

Catechism

- **CCC 715.** the prophets promise the Spirit and a new heart
- **CCC 1287.** the Spirit poured out on the whole messianic people
- **CCC 1432.** God must give the new heart; conversion is first his grace
- **CCC 694.** water as the sign of the Spirit's action in baptism