

Softened Hearts and Willing Hands

This week in prayer and fasting, we will be praying that God will soften hearts and bring more people into relationship with Him. The Bible speaks often of the heart. The word *heart* can mean different things depending on the context. However, most often, the term refers not to the physical organ that beats in your chest but to the soul of a human being that controls their will and emotions.

As I reflected on the concept of a 'softened heart', my mind went to the scripture in Ezekiel 36 where God speaks to the mountains through the prophet Ezekiel. In His faithfulness, God commanded the mountains to be fruitful and the harvest to be plentiful for the sake of His children that would soon be returning to inhabit the land. How lovely that God makes preparation for His people before they even knew they needed it.

But pay attention to vs 24-26 where God moves His promise from the soon to be possessed land, to the people. And though the people are not perfect, God issues them a promise to gather them, redeem them, and to soften their hearts. "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 uncleannesses, 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." Ezekiel 36:24-26 (ESV)

What a beautiful promise! A heart of flesh represents one that is soft and sensitive to the call and the move of The Spirit, while a heart of stone represents one that is hardened, full of our own defenses and unable to hear and respond to the voice of God. Someone who has received a new heart from God represents transformed behaviour.

The human heart was created to mirror God's own heart (See Gen. 1:27). We were designed to love Him, love righteousness, and walk in harmony with God and others (Micah 6:8). When we stubbornly refuse to follow God, our hearts, which were designed to communicate with God, are hardened. A heart of stone finds it impossible to repent, to love God, or to please Him (Romans 8:8). On our own, our hearts are so hardened that we cannot even seek God (Romans 3:11). In John 6:44, Jesus points out that "No man can

come to Him unless the Father first draws him. A change of heart toward God requires a supernatural transformation. In the first week of our fast during our very first Zoom prayer meeting, the leader mentioned the importance of vulnerability in our personal consecration. It was interesting to me how related this concept of vulnerability is to the idea of a softened heart.

May our hearts be softened and transformed by the power of God, and may those who encounter us, whether it be through visiting our services, interacting with us in the workplace or a random meeting in a store, be drawn to the God we serve. May we be intercessors for those who have slid back out of relationship with God and may Showers of Blessing be a safe place to nurture God's children back into loving and fulfilling relationship with Him.

GETTING STARTED

Read Ezekiel 36:1-the end.

1. Consider Ezekiel's audience in chapter 36. How might the message of a softened heart have been relevant to the people of Israel at that time? In what ways does it continue to be relevant to believers today?
2. In God promises to give a new heart and a new spirit. What does this signify about the nature of the heart before this transformation? **Ezekiel 36:26**
3. How does the promise of a new heart inspire believers to live with hope and confidence in God's transformative power? What practical steps can individuals take to cultivate a heart that is responsive to God's work of renewal?
4. What role does the Holy Spirit play in the process of receiving a new heart? How can believers actively cooperate with the Holy Spirit in this transformation?

LET'S GET PERSONAL

Get your pad of paper and reflect on the following:

1. In what areas of your life do you find yourself resisting being vulnerable with God? Do you ever find yourself operating in stony hearted, 'self-protection mode' rather than trusting God to be your defence?

2. Are there opportunities to witness to others and share your faith that you resist or neglect? Reflect on examples and why.
3. When you see visitors at church are you creating a safe space for them to surrender the heart of stone and allow God to give them a heart of flesh? Or creating an atmosphere where they feel judged, belittled, or unable to fit in?
4. What is one small thing you can do to create a safe space where people can encounter God?