

# The Pursuit of Spirituality

Ezekiel 36:22-28

preached January 3, 2010 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

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. I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. 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 upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

## The Desire for Spirituality.

After going through a divorce and developing a low self-esteem, a woman decided to join a meditation center that had an Eastern religious philosophy. Originally she merely wanted to lose weight and get her life back on track but eventually found additional benefits from her involvement. She began to experiment with other practices such as vegetarianism, mandalas, incense, breathing practices, and crystals. When interviewed by a sociologist nine years later about her experiences, this woman said she was just beginning to grow and would keep shopping for spiritual experiences

([beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Books/2002/07/Spiritual-But-Not-Religious.aspx?p=2](http://beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Books/2002/07/Spiritual-But-Not-Religious.aspx?p=2)).

We are living in a period of time when many people have a heightened desire for spirituality. While there has been a decline in people's participation in religious organizations and identification

with Christian faith among US citizens, there seems to be no decline in the spiritual interest of people overall. Today, many people attempt to satisfy their spiritual hunger in ways that are less traditional than the means with which we are familiar. It is not uncommon to find some of these means being explored by those who call themselves Christians and who are within churches.

The spiritual hunger within human beings is as ancient as our history and is told by the religious practices of nearly every culture. In the Bible, we see it expressed early when the story of the two original brothers, Cain and Abel, is told. The story begins with the brothers making offerings to God.

The psalmist wrote of his own spiritual longings: *As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God* (Psalm 42:1). St. Augustine understood this deep spiritual longing when he wrote these words: *Our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee, O Lord.*

Most believe that human beings are more than material beings; mere carbon units that function as long as our biological machines are working. That something more is what we label as "spiritual." Many want to get in contact with that spiritual part of their being or inner self. Most hope there is something bigger than each of us, a higher power that influences our existence and gives meaning to it. To be spiritual involves experiencing the higher power.

In the past few decades, an interesting phenomenon has taken place. Many people, perhaps as high as 20%, identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious." Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these two terms were basically interchangeable. But now they are viewed as having different meanings. Spiritual has more to do with one's own personal individualized faith and journey while religious is identified with rituals and creeds of religious institutions. It seems many have some level of belief but do not like the "religious" trappings.

Probably all of us gathered here this morning have some level of spiritual longing. If it were otherwise, we would not be here. Some would prefer not to have the "religious" trappings while others find comfort and meaning in religious traditions. But regardless of how we might feel about the "religious," how can we satisfy the deep spiritual longings we have? Is there a roadmap for this journey?

**The Spiritual Roadmap – The starting point.** Jim Rohn, a motivational speaker who has influenced thousands, is credited with this quotation: *Motivation is what gets you started. Habit is what keeps you going* (<http://thinkexist.com/quotation/>). I want to use these two thoughts as an outline for drawing our map.

Ezekiel spoke to a people who were desperate and depressed, who had lost nearly all sense of hope and needed to be motivated. Their nation had been devastated by Babylon and they found themselves as aliens in a foreign land. They wondered if they could ever recover and have a meaningful relationship with their God. Ezekiel not only served to motivate them but has continued to echo through the sound chambers of time to speak to all who have deep spiritual longings.

Through the prophet, God shared that He would act favorably toward the people, not because of who they were or what they had done, but because of who God was. God would act on their behalf because it is God's nature to act. God acts for God's name sake. Just as water flows downhill because of liquid dynamics, so God acts to satisfy the spiritual longings of people.

God committed himself to acting toward his people (and us). That gets us started (and restarted) on our spiritual quest. God promised to cleanse his people and give them a new heart and a new spirit. These are vital for our journey toward deeper spirituality.

*I will sprinkle you with clean water and you will be clean.* When Ezekiel's

audience heard these words they were probably reminded of the practice of the priests who were required to wash themselves before offering sacrifices. They were to be clean before God. They also may have remembered the practice of sprinkling blood on the Day of Atonement for forgiving sins. As many of us hear these words, we are reminded of baptism where the water reminds us of Christ's cleansing us and our being marked as people belonging to Christ.

Being clean is critical to the deeper spiritual quest. Failures, lack of action, sin and mistakes can easily block our way to knowing and experiencing God fully. Even though corroded battery cables may be a connection to the source of power, the corrosion prevents the power from flowing from the battery to the starter and the engine will not start. One must clean the connection to have the power flow. God promises to cleanse.

God promised to give the people a new heart and a new spirit. The imagery used is vivid for all who take a moment and open their spiritual minds.

God makes a commitment to do radical heart surgery – take from his people their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. I think it would be safe to say that the heart surgeons in our congregation would agree that this is a tougher procedure than a medical heart transplant.

In the biblical language, one's heart is the seat of her mind and emotions. From the heart flow one's passions and affections. When the heart grows hard, a person becomes calloused and no longer feels or cares for others or for the things of God. The hard-hearted one does not respond to God. His heart is closed to spiritual matters. Have you ever met a hard-hearted person? Have you ever sensed that your own heart had hardened? God promised to remove the calloused heart and give a heart of flesh that was alive.

Not only does God promise to do a radical cardiac procedure, he promises to do a radical pulmonary procedure. He will give his people a new spirit. The Hebrew word translated as "spirit" is רוח which can be translated as "breath" or "wind." God promised to give people a fresh breath, a new spiritual breath and

orientation. God would resuscitate the people spiritually by breathing His רוח into their lungs. Then the new heart would carry this fresh breath throughout the person. The end result would be the people's doing and being what God desired.

This is what God wants to do – clean up his people and give them a new heart and a new spirit. This spiritual act begins with God and is done out of who God is.

### The human initiative.

Imagine for a moment that you received word that you were the grand prize winner of a contest at Lexus of Chattanooga. You had won a brand new LS 10. All you needed to do was to come to the dealership, sign the necessary papers, claim your prize, provide insurance and keep gas in it. What would you do? Would you be motivated to do what was necessary to claim the prize?

What must we do to claim and keep the great spiritual prize God offers?

In Ezekiel 18, the image of a new heart and new spirit appears. In that passage, the language is somewhat different than in our scripture lesson. Listen to the words: *Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!* Notice the emphasis is on "getting," a human action. Yet in our text it was on "giving," an action of God. These two passages show us what we commonly see in scripture, the Divine and human cooperation. God acts – people respond.

Our getting involves opening our lives to God's action and allowing it to take place. We actively seek this to happen. This opens our lives to God's spiritual work.

The next step on this journey takes us back to something I quoted earlier: *Motivation is what gets you started. Habit is what keeps you going.* Opening our lives to the work of God begins the spiritual journey but holy habits keep us on the journey.

It is fascinating to me to hear what exotic types of things people will do to have spiritual experiences. Some seem unusual and may have some value while other can be detrimental to one's overall spiritual health. For example, ingesting

things that produce hallucinations can be deadly. Tinkering with things of the occult can bring spiritual harm.

There are five holy habits that are as old as the Bible that move us to deeper levels in our spirituality. To be a habit, each must be practiced regularly. An occasional experience with one or more might be beneficial, but ongoing observance reaps the benefits of a deeper spiritual life.

- *Prayer* is our link of communication with the transcendent God. It is more than a time of asking for this and that. It is a time of communing with our Creator.
- *Worship* (both private and corporate) is a deep spiritual act. We were created to worship our Creator and to do so in community.
- *Bible study* (both private and corporate) is the means to discover and discern the story of God with humanity – who God is and who we are, how we can know God and how we can live and make our world a better place.
- *Service* is the means of sharing the gifts God has given us to bless others. It may come in the form of going on a mission trip, teaching a SS class, helping a neighbor who is in need, etc. Serving others in Christ's name widens our spiritual experience.
- *Giving* is a way we share what we have been given to bless God's kingdom. Through giving, what we have does not own and control us. Instead it becomes a tool of ministry.

To go deeper spiritually, we need to practice these holy habits regularly. With the launching of the New Year, it is a great time to commit ourselves to one or more of these. I challenge you to think about these and which you will make a holy habit in 2010.

A couple of months ago, I examined my own life about one of these holy habits – Bible study. I was reading to prepare for sermons, lessons and answer questions, but I was lacking in personal study. So I thought when could I do personal study? I decided to begin getting up at 5:30 a.m., when Patty gets ready for school, to read and to journal. I am trying to make this a holy habit. It is not easy every morning but I want to establish the habit.

### **Remembering of Baptism.**

The journey to deeper spirituality for each of us begins with God's action and our response to it. It is nurtured through our holy habits.

This morning, as a climax to this service and as a way of launching this New Year on a high spiritual note, we will have a time of remembering our baptism. You are invited to come forward as you are led by the Holy Spirit to the place of water. You have two options: Go to one of the fountains where you may go alone to dip your fingers into the water and touch to your forehead or come to one of the pastors stationed here. We will place a water cross on your forehead and say, "Receive the cleansing waters and remember your baptism."

This morning there may be someone here who has never been baptized and you want to be baptized during this time. Please tell the pastor when you come. We will then baptize you.