

A HEART PREPARED
A Devotional Meditation from
Exodus 35:1-38:20; Deuteronomy 29:4, 30:6; 2 Kings 12:1-17; Jeremiah 31:31-34;
Ezekiel 11:17-21; Joel 2:32; Matthew 11:28-30; Romans 10:9

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One of my favorite classes in graduate school was a seminar on the English Reformation. That's where I learned the intellectual history of the Christian faith I have lived since childhood. The advantage of learning this history in a secular state university was that we could survey the breadth and depth of theological development from an objective viewpoint. At the distance of four hundred years, we were sufficiently removed from the political, social, and emotional issues of the day that had caused tremendous upheaval in England and English America. Free of those pressures, we could examine the theological tenets of every branch of Protestantism, from the established Anglican Church to the dissenting Puritans, all the way down to the Anabaptists, Quakers, and Levelers. To my delight, elements of each sect appealed to me, and aspects of each were reflected in my journey as a disciple of my Messiah.



Assertion of Liberty of Conscience by the Independents of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, 1644. John Rogers Herbert, 1847. (Heritage Collection at UK Parliament, Palace of Westminster, London, via Wikimedia Commons.)

That seminar made something click in my understanding of Reformed Theology. That's the theological stream I first encountered in my Presbyterian high school. All I knew then was that the Presbyterian emphasis on predestination was anathema to my Baptist parents and the church we attended. In church I learned that everyone is free to choose or reject Jesus, but in school I heard that God somehow knew what we would all choose. My conclusion then is still my view today: God has not yet revealed all His mysteries, and among those mysteries is the way predestination and free will work without cancelling each other out. Both, after all, are in the Bible, so both must be part of God's plan.

This is where that English Reformation seminar proved very helpful. I already knew Presbyterianism as an intellectual faith rooted in Reformed Theology. That had appealed to me for a long time. In graduate school I learned about the intellectual wrestlings of the English and early American Puritans in their prayerful study of the scriptures to reconcile what they saw there about predestination with what they experienced about individual choice. Their studies involved exploration of the *prepared heart*, meaning the process by which the Holy Spirit brings a person to a condition in which he or she is ready to choose life in Christ. The conversion moment doesn't happen all at once, but over time, as the

Spirit uses people and circumstances to guide an individual to the point at which the heart is ready to turn from the ways of the world and embrace the ways of God's Kingdom.

Like all theological constructs, this one is limited and flawed, but it is useful, and it reflects examples from scripture. Salvation is a heart matter, after all. So is the lifestyle transformation that the believer in Messiah Yeshua is supposed to undergo. Moreover, this transformation happens in stages. Even as conversion doesn't happen all at once, the new disciple doesn't practice a righteous lifestyle immediately. If we're honest, all of us are still in transition, and deep down we know that we will remain in transition until our journey in this present life is complete.

This is not just an individual process; it's a national process. Just as the Holy Spirit strives with individual men and women, He strives as well with the corporate body of God's people so that we may become the spotless Bride of our Messiah. This is the story of the Bible as told in the history of Israel, God's Covenant Nation into which all disciples of Messiah Yeshua are adopted. That's why the examples of our spiritual Hebrew ancestors are so instructive. They show us where we've been, where we're going, and how we get there.

Here's an example from the construction of the Tabernacle:

Moses also said to all the congregation of *Bnei-Yisrael*, "This is the word which *ADONAI* commanded saying: Take from among you an offering for *ADONAI*. Whoever has a willing heart, let him bring *ADONAI's* offering: gold, silver and bronze; blue, purple and scarlet cloth; fine linen and goat hair; ram skins dyed red, sealskins and acacia wood; oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the sweet incense; onyx stones, and setting stones for the ephod and for the breastplate. Let every wise-hearted man among you come and make everything that *ADONAI* has commanded. . . .

Exodus 35:4-10 TLV

The key phrase is "Whoever has a willing heart." That's step one in the process of transformation. We see that Israel responded overwhelmingly to this call for contributions, giving so much that Moses had to ask them to stop bringing their offerings. They also had plenty of labor for the work, thanks to the abundance of wise-hearted people whose hearts were also willing to contribute their skills.

That's commendable, but it's not the whole story. A generation later, at the end of his life, Moses said this to the children of those Israelites:

But to this day *ADONAI* has not given you a heart to know, or eyes to see, or ears to hear. . . *ADONAI* your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants—to love *ADONAI* your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.

Deuteronomy 29:4, 30:6 TLV

Circumcision of the heart is the process the Holy Spirit works on all of us. It's the reason God made a New Covenant with Israel that involves replacing our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh on which He will write His commandments. That's the Covenant sealed with the blood of Israel's Messiah, and empowered by the Holy Spirit poured out

on all the body. When Paul quotes Joel saying, “Everyone who calls upon the name of *ADONAI* shall be saved” (Romans 10:9; Joel 2:32), he is referring to this process.

But if the preparation of the heart is a process that, so far, has taken many lifetimes, what was in the hearts of those ancient Hebrews that moved them to give their wealth and labor to build the Tabernacle?

- Was it an expression of shame and guilt, and hopefully repentance, at having recently grieved the heart of God by worshipping the Golden Calf?
- Was it a desire to get back into God’s good graces by doing what He said, even though it didn’t all make sense?
- Was it, perhaps, a desire to get rid of excess baggage? Gold and jewels are valuable and pretty, but hauling them around the desert can become burdensome. Maybe a few of those Israelites just wanted to let someone else carry their burdens.

I find no fault with any of those motives. They are the same motives surfacing so frequently in my own heart –

- Shame and guilt over my own transgressions moves me so often to repentance, throwing myself at the feet of the One I have so often grieved.
- Repentance moves me to return to my Redeemer’s good graces by doing what He says, even though it doesn’t always make sense.
- When I grow weary of hauling my baggage on my own shoulders, then I realize He is the One Who says to cast my burdens on Him and take up His yoke, and in so doing find rest for my soul.

This is the beauty of God’s redemptive invitation: we don’t have to understand how it works to accept it. Understanding comes as we walk out the redemption received when we accept our Creator’s invitation. It takes some heart preparation to get to that point, and only a heart prepared can pass beyond it.