

Return to Me - And I will Return to You

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[0 : 00] I'm glad to be back. So I wonder, let's pray together and ask God to help us as we look at this part of his word.

Father, we thank you so much for your grace and kindness to us in Jesus. We thank you for your word. We thank you that you have not left us without it, but that you have given us your word richly in scripture and in your son and in the gospel of your son.

Please, we pray, Father, help us to read and understand it today that we might respond to you appropriately, worship you appropriately, love you appropriately and obey you appropriately. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, from the smallest child to the oldest adult, every human being feels it. We all show it. We all have it.

It is part of our shared humanity, an emotion we all have and we all show. And yet its use is in the contemporary world spiralling out of control.

[1 : 09] Increasingly, it is being spewed out in excess. Destructively, it's tearing apart marriages, families, friendships and even our own happiness. It leads to people doing horrible things to each other, such as swearing, fighting with violence, breaking bones, awful abuse, even killing people.

And it's such a problem in our world that there are counselling classes entirely devoted to helping us handle and master it. The emotion I'm talking about is, of course, anger.

When we think of anger, we think of something powerful, don't we? We think of something destructive, something that is very, very ugly in its display of humanity, as it were.

Something that brings out the worst in everyone. My friends, this is the background that most of us bring into church today. Some here, among us tonight, know anger overwhelmingly well.

We've seen it in our families. Some of us here will have experienced the abuse of angry persons. We've seen it used against the ones we love. Or we have felt it well up in our own being.

[2 : 20] Some of us here know this and had disastrous consequences. We all know how bad and how ugly anger is, don't we?

And yet, here, in the heart of our passage today, this ancient prophet says it unambiguously.

Look at verse 2. Without wavering, the prophet tells us that the God of all the world and the God of his people can be very angry.

Friends, today we are going to explore this idea of anger. I'm going to talk about God and anger. However, before we do, I need to do two things.

I need to tell you that anger in God is not like anger in me and in you. At least, not mostly. Secondly, it is not filled with the selfishness that often characterises our anger.

[3 : 21] It is not unpredictable and uncontrollable. Second, in order to understand God's anger here, I need to tell you about his people. I need to tell you about the people that this book, Zechariah, is written to.

I need to tell you about the history of the relationship that there is between God and this people. So let's get started. Now, I've given you an outline and I strongly encourage you to take notes tonight.

But more than that, I encourage you to have your Bibles open and to follow through your Bibles with me. Follow it with me. Check out what I say and how I say it and whether I'm accurate.

You see, friends, we here at Holy Trinity believe that through Scripture, God speaks. We are committed to examining the Scriptures and hearing from God. So I want you to do that tonight. Don't be afraid.

Examine them. And don't think that I'm necessarily always right. You know, check it out. Be lined up with lots of good people in the Bible, particularly St. Acts, the Bereans, who checked out what Paul had to say.

[4 : 21] So, you know, have a look at what we're doing. Check it out. Now, in my outline, I'm at first point under the heading of Zechariah, chapter 1, verses 1 to 6. I want to tell you about this people, this people of God who have a past.

You see, the people we're talking about here are people who are related to God. God formed a relationship with these people by choosing their ancestor Abraham back in Genesis 12.

He then solidified that relationship by rescuing them from Egypt in Exodus chapter 1 through to Exodus chapter 18. He then entered into covenant relationship with them in Exodus 19.

In Exodus 20 to 23, he outlined all the expectations of that covenant relationship when he gave to them his law. In Exodus 24, the elders went up to Mount Sinai and God sat down in friendship with them.

He ate a meal with them to ratify his covenant. But 40 days have passed since then. And within those 40 days, they showed their true colours.

[5 : 31] Let me show you. I want you to turn in your Bibles to Exodus 32. And the first person to get there might yell out a page number for us. It's really not hard to find you. It's the second book in the Bible, Exodus.

Someone's got it already, have they? 69. Good. Okay, Exodus chapter 32. Now, let me read to you from the beginning of the chapter. Follow it closely.

See what it says. Moses is still up on the mountain. Remember, speaking with God. The people are at the base of the mountain. And follow and let me tell you what happens. When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said, Come, make gods for us who shall go before us.

And as for this man, Moses, this man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we don't know what's become of him. And Aaron said to them, Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons and your daughters and bring them to me.

So all the people went off and took off the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron.

And he took the gold from them, formed it into a mold and cast an image of a calf.

[6 : 36] And they said, These are the gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt. And when Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made proclamation and said, Tomorrow will be a festival for the Lord.

And they rose up the next day, offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to revel. That's how the relationship between Israel and God gets underway from Israel's side.

God has acted in this remarkable kindness and generosity to them. He has rescued them. He has. But they just turn around and betray him.

They break relationship through this rebellion. And this is the first of many such breaches. But God forgives them. He promises that even though they've done this, he will bring them into the promised land.

But when he shows the promised land to them, they fail to trust in him. They rebel against him.

Again, he forgives them and continues to go with them. Finally, they stand on the edge of the promised land in the fifth book of the Bible, Deuteronomy.

[7 : 46] And God repeats his law and he tells them, This is how you ought to live in the land that you're about to enter. That I am giving you. This land flowing with milk and honey. This is how you should live in it.

And they enter the land. And they disobey God. And they tell God that what really they would like is a human king rather than him being their king. And God concedes.

He gives them a human king. But their kings really are no better than everyone else of the people. Their kings rebel against God, commit adultery, disobey his laws. And so God punishes them by sending foreign kings to overthrow them.

He allows foreign kings to take them into exile in Babylon for 70 years. Those 70 years end in about 539 BC. And another foreign king allows them to return to the land in 539 BC.

And they go back. And the intention of God is that when they go back, they build him a temple. That temple will symbolize that they want to put God back in the center of their lives.

[8 : 54] About 18 years pass. It's now about 520 BC. We're nearly at our passage for tonight. We are going to get there eventually.

We're nearly there. However, before we get there, I want to go to an incident that happens two months before our passage. Please open your Bibles at Haggai chapter 1. Now, Haggai is a bit harder to find.

So again, can I have someone who's, you know, quick at Bible flipping to give us a page number for Haggai? 768. Thank you. Now, remember, this is two months before what happens in Zechariah. It's 520 BC. Let's look at verses 1 to 6. In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, in the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, governor of Judea, and to Joshua, son of Jehoshadak, the high priest.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, these people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house. Then the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai saying, is it a time for you yourselves to live in panelled houses while this house lies in ruins?

[10:10] Now, therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, consider how you have fared. You have sown much and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough to eat.

You drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And what you earn, and you that earn wages, earn wages to put them in a bag of holes.

I wonder if you can see what the Lord is saying through Haggai. He's telling his people who have returned from exile that they are not doing what they ought to be doing. They are not building God's temple, but instead they're getting on with ordinary living.

They're being ordinary people. They're being like the rest of the world, and they're neglecting God's house. Instead, they're just getting on with life. And because their focus is not right, God is causing their crops to fail, or not bear as they should.

So they sow much, but harvest little. They drink, but they never have their fill. They clothe themselves, but they can't stay warm. And they earn wages, but it's as though the bags they put their coins into have holes in them, and they just fall straight through.

[11:17] Because there's never as much as they put in there. And all of this because they are disobedient again to God. See, the exile hasn't done really much for them, has it, in terms of their nature.

They're much the same as they entered into exile. Can you hear the history of Israel? It is a history filled with disobedience, a history filled with sin, a history full of waywardness and neglect of God and his word.

Okay. So this is the history of his people. This is, if we could put it this way, their past. Now let's turn to their present. That's the next heading.

Verse 1 tells us that the present for them in this case is two months after that prophecy from Haggai. It is 520 BC. It's in the eighth month of the second year of Darius.

On this date, the word of the Lord comes to the prophet Zechariah. Now look at verse 2. Zechariah states categorically that the Lord was angry with their ancestors.

[12:22] Now by their ancestors, I suspect he means the whole lot of them all the way back at least probably to the Exodus. And God's anger here is not simply God losing his temper because he didn't get his own way.

Please understand that. That's not what God's anger is like. No, God's anger is his opposition to the fact that they will not listen to him even though he knows what is best for them.

God's anger is his opposition to their constant thinking and acting as though he did not know what was best for them. It is his opposition to the fact that they have from day one broken relationship a relationship that they had freely entered into and willingly entered into and said to God, yes, we'll do whatever you say and didn't.

God's anger, you see, is God's holy and right opposition to their wrong, their sin, their arrogance, their self-assertion. That is what God's anger is.

He has shown himself to be from page one of the Bible and particularly in relation to Israel uncompromisingly good, uncompromisingly benevolent, uncompromisingly having their best interests in mind and they have shown themselves to be uncompromisingly bad, uncompromisingly malevolent and uncompromisingly self-interested.

[13:49] And as a good God interested in good things, he is justly angry with them and their sin.

By the way, in the Bible, you get angry with sinners as well as sin. Don't buy into that other lie.

Right? No, God is angry with sinners and as a good God interested in good things, he's justly angry with them and their sin.

God is angry. That is, God is personally opposed to these people whose lives have done countless harm to others and to themselves and to God's good purposes in his world.

He is angry. God's anger is the revulsion that he feels, the opposition of his whole being to the rebellion of those he had loved, rescued, entered into covenant with and sought the good of.

God the just must be a God who is angry in the face of such sin or he's not just and he has been angry and verse 2 makes this very clear.

[14:54] Verse 2, you see, forms the background though for verse 3. Look at verse 3. Verse 3 moves us on to our next heading. It tells us that these people with a disastrous past can be people with a possible alternative future.

Look at it again. Verse 3, the Lord of hosts, the Lord of the heavenly armies. That's what Lord of hosts means, the Lord of armies. He says, return to me and I will return to you.

It's a magnificent promise, isn't it? God says to this rebellious people subject to his righteous anger, return to me and I will return to you.

See, God looks forward to a future and he promises this can be a reversal of the past. It can be filled not with the fear of judgment but with hope.

If only they fill their lives with God and God's good will for them. If only they don't just sort of live ordinary lives but live lives full of God.

[15:58] As they fill their lives with him and with his good will, he will personally draw near to them and they will find his hand as Psalm 145 says, filled with good things.

He will overflow with goodness and not anger toward them. I wonder if you can see the winsomeness of the appeal here. God is pleading with his people. Look at it in verse 4. He urges them, make a break with the past.

Don't be like your ancestors to whom the former prophets proclaimed. Thus, says the Lord of hosts, return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds but they did not hear or heed me, says the Lord.

Now look at verse 5. In verse 3, if verse 3 is a promise of a gracious gift of God's presence and verse 4 is a plea to make a break with the past, verse 5 is a very sober warning.

Look at what it says. God asks where their ancestors are and he notes that the prophets, well they don't live forever, they're not around any longer. And the implications are clear. Can you see it there?

[17:03] The ancestors are dead because of God's judgment on them. They didn't listen to the words of the prophets. And now those very prophets, well they've passed on now but there's one thing that remains and what is it?

It's the word that they spoke. Those words are God's words. They are eternal words. They remain God's words and that's what verse 6 says. Though they are dead, yet these prophets speak. And their words have had their effect. The ancestors were overtaken by God's judgment in the exile just as the prophets had promised. And the books of Lamentations tell us that after the judgment of the exile, the ancestors actually did repent.

They looked at what had happened. They said, yeah, we have been in the wrong. They acknowledged God was right. That he had indeed dealt with them according to their ways and their deeds just as he planned and just as he promised.

So there we have it. There's a people with a past. A people who have a present after the exile. These people have been promised a wonderful, wonderful future by God.

[18:11] Now let me tell you what happened. What happened is they continued to walk in the way of their ancestors. They continued to sin.

You see, some of the history that is in the book of Ezra and Nehemiah tells the story of the years that followed. And their past continued into their present and it shaped their future.

Friends, let me tell you why it did. Let me tell you why their future was no different to their past. It was because they were human, basically.

They were descendants of Adam and Eve and Adam and Eve were independent rebels against God and those who followed them lined up with them. The story of the Old Testament is therefore unrelenting.

It tells us that all humans, even those who are bound to God in covenant, are just like Adam and Eve. Even the great David can't get it right all the time. They're made of the same stuff.

[19 : 15] They are independent, disobedient, sinful, unable to escape their nature. Friends, with this, I want to tonight move on to a number of theological points that I'd like you to ponder with me.

Very significant theological points. The first has to do with human nature. You see, the Bible is clear that sinfulness and rebellion is the characteristic mark of humans from their birth.

Humans are unable to do the good that they know is good. Our nature is enslaved to sin. Now you can see it many places in the Bible.

For example, you even see it within six or seven chapters in. As early as Genesis 6, verse 5, we're told this. Listen to it carefully. The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.

Now, did you hear all the alls and every and so on? Every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.

[20 : 23] Friends, this is uncompromising, isn't it? It is a sobering truth because if it is true, we will be unable to save ourselves, won't we? If that is the inclination of our hearts, we will be unable to save ourselves.

We are unable to respond in a way that is pleasing to God consistently and coherently. As Paul says in Ephesians 2, verses 1 and 5, we are dead in our trespasses and sins.

Friends, please listen to the statements that Scripture makes and the stories that it tells. Because our human nature is corrupted, we are unable to bring ourselves to God.

We are unable to please Him. If you are Christian, I want you to hear this word from God. We have all come from a common place. There is not one of us here tonight that has not come from this common place if you are Christian.

Before we came to know Jesus and believe in Him, we were dead in our trespasses and sins. Now, if you are not Christian, then I want you to hear a word from God.

[21 : 31] Without Jesus, you are distant from God because of your sinful nature. You are unable to please Him and no amount of good deeds will bring you to Him and no amount of religious practices will bring you to Him.

We share with Israel and Adam and Eve a sinful and corrupt nature. That is who we are. And that brings me to the second theological point.

That's the one I want to stress tonight, friends. Because we are all sinful, all people are subject to God's wrath. God's wrath is God's anger. Same thing, really.

And Scripture tells us that God is capable of intense anger or opposition to sin. And because we are people who by nature are sinful, what's that going to do?

If God's opposed to sin and sinners and we are full of sin and we are sinners, then what's that going to do? It doesn't matter whether we've done it defiantly or we've just done it in ignorance.

[22 : 41] Sin is sin and sin angers God. Friends, God made you for Himself. He made you for worship He made you to be filled with Him and to be oriented around Him.

He made you to be someone who hangs off His Word and moulds your existence around His person, His deeds, His Word and His Son. That is what you were made for.

But the story of humanity is that we have dedicated ourselves to a much lesser cause, haven't we?

We have opposed God by replacing what He wants with much lesser things and because God is good and knows that these lesser things are not good for us, He opposes us.

More than that, because God is good, He will judge us for the things that we have done and for the ways that we have shut Him out of our existence. If He didn't judge us, He really wouldn't be truly good, would He?

Because He would love our evil and not hate it. Friends, don't think for a moment that because I'm an Old Testament scholar that I don't mind my New Testament, you know, I'm just caught in that world of the prophets and so on.

[23 : 59] No. The New Testament speaks of God's anger as strongly as the old. Let me give you some examples. Here's Jesus. We can't go to a better place than that, can we?

In Luke 12, verses 4 and 5, Jesus says, I tell you, my friends, do not fear, those who can kill the body and after that can do nothing. But I'll warn you whom to fear. Fear Him who after He has killed has authority to cast you into hell.

Yes, I tell you, fear Him. Mark 9, 47 and 48, Jesus talks of the threat of being thrown into hell and He says that there the worms never die and fire is never quenched.

God's wrath is God's revulsion of His whole being toward the rebellion of His created beings against His goodwill for them.

It is His opposition toward those who oppose this good, His good. Friends, a message that tells people that God is not angry with sin is a false message.

[25 : 05] it is a false prophecy. It is a lie. And in the end, I think it's idolatrous because it amounts to putting a false understanding of God in place of the true God and His character and what He says about Himself.

That is what idolatry is, isn't it? It's suppressing the truth of God in unrighteousness. So this is the truth of God. He is opposed to sin and those who do it.

But let's move on to the next point because it's a lot brighter. The next theological point takes up one that's stated clearly on the occasion of Israel's first sin. Do you remember the page number for Exodus 32?

69. Go to it. 69. Do you remember the sin of the golden calf that we read about earlier on? Well, God saw the sin of His people and what happens in chapters 32 and 33 is God threatens to act in anger and just wipe them out.

Moses then intercedes for the people and God relents from sending judgment. In His actions He reveals that He's the God of compassion and overwhelming and surprising love. You see, because you'd totally not expect that, would you?

[26 : 16] That God would just say, if you've done this thing of the golden calf, it's all right. I relent from sending judgment. But He does. And then He reveals His character to Moses in word.

Have a look at it. Exodus 34, verses 6 and 7. So just a page or two past where you were. Exodus 34, 6 and 7. God reveals Himself to Moses and look at what He says.

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children to the third or the fourth generation.

Now, did you hear it? Because if you grasp this, you will grasp a lot about the character of God. God may be the God of anger, but overwhelmingly, His mercy and steadfast love triumphs over His judgment.

His judgment might only last a generation or two, if that, in comparison to His steadfast love and mercy, which lasts a thousand generations.

[27 : 45] You see, God's overwhelming disposition is love. Now, of course, we see these things most clearly, don't we where? On the cross.

cross. After all, the cross is the greatest indication in Scripture that God is angry over sin. For in grace, Jesus Christ suffers the full extent of God's wrath so that we might be forgiven.

Mercy triumphs over judgment. Grace overwhelms wrath while not negating it. Friends, I wonder if I could have a word to those of you who are not yet Christians.

Friends, if this is you, if you are not yet Christian, you're here tonight, I want to tell you that in relation to God, you are distant, and unfortunately, it sounds hard to say, but if you're not Christian, you are dead in sin.

You are captive to the evil one, and you are under the wrath of God. My friends, this is a terrible place to be in. I have been there, and it is not good.

[28 : 54] It is a terrible place to be, but you don't need to be there. For in Jesus and through Jesus, God has provided a way for you to be overwhelmed with grace and mercy rather than wrath.

So I urge you to flee to Jesus and to find shelter in him. For in him, there is a world of forgiveness, grace, mercy, and the abundant goodness of God who loves you and only has good things for you. But let me speak also to those of you who are already Christians. Friends, if you're a Christian, you have escaped the consequences of your sin. You've been bought with the precious blood of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God.

you have put your faith in Christ, you've accepted his forgiveness, and now you're waiting for him to return, him who will rescue you from the coming wrath.

However, there are some of you here tonight who are clinging on to sin. I want to urge you, as I urge myself, to stop. Listen to the Apostle Paul.

[30 : 07] Listen to what he has to say. He clearly speaks the word of God to you this day. You must also consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus, because that's who you are.

That's what you are. Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal body to obey its passions. No longer present the members of your body to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourself to God as one who has been bought from death to life.

Be who God has made you in Christ. My last theological point is the shortest one. It comes from verses 4 and 5 of Zechariah.

Go back to Zechariah chapter 1. Friends, remember the people who heard the preaching of the prophets are now long gone.

Those Israelites that were there listening to the prophets, wherever they came, whenever they came, they're gone. The people who heard the teaching of Jesus, they've gone too. Paul the apostle, he's dead and buried.

[31 : 15] But what has not died is the word of God, has it? And what will never die is the word of God.

And the true word of God, who is the Lord Jesus Christ, he did die. But now he sits at the right hand of his father, alive. The words that the prophets spoke are still true.

The word that Jesus spoke is still true. But even greater than that is God's word who is Jesus. And he is alive.

And he is true. In Jesus, God has drawn near to humanity. And here comes the punchline. Same punchline as is here in this text. Draw near to God.

And he will draw near to you. The promise has not changed. The invitation has not changed. Across the centuries, the word of God is the same yesterday, today and forever.

[32 : 22] Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that in Jesus you have drawn near to us.

Please help us this day, we pray, to draw near to you in him. And Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[33 : 17] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.