

Return to the Lord

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Preacher: Nigel Anderson

[0 : 00] Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take with you words and return to the Lord. Say to him, take away all iniquity, accept what is good. We will pay with bulls the vows of our lips. Assyria shall not save us, we will not ride on horses, and we will say no more, our God, to the work of our hands than you, the orphan, finds mercy. I will heal their apostasy. I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the Jew of Israel. He shall blossom like the lily.

He shall take root like the trees of Lebanon. His shoots shall spread out. His beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow. They shall flourish like the grain. They shall blossom like the vine. Their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon. O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after you.

I am like an evergreen cypress. From me comes your fruit. Whoever is wise, let them understand these things. Whoever is discerning, let them know them. For the ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them. Amen. And may God add his blessing to that reading from his holy word. There's something about returning to a place, something about returning to a physical place of so much blessing that stirs the heart, that rejoices the heart, that, well, makes glad the heart in the very act of returning. Just the other day, a few days ago, I had to walk through the meadows to reach my dentist. And in that walk, I walked past the flat where I spent the first four years of my life in Meadow Place. And as I walked past that flat, there was a, I dare say, a glimmer of nostalgia, even more than a glimmer of nostalgia. Memories came back to me as I recall the times when I would play in that street where I grew up, where I would play even in the bandstand in the meadows that no longer exists.

Happy memories came to me as I, as I lingered on, on, on these former times. And of course, just passing that, that place, it was a relatively short period of time as I walked past that, that flat. But it brought home to me the truth that God kept me even in my tender years.

And I really had to go past that building to get a perspective on God's love for me, undeserving me, that even in my early years, God was with me.

[3 : 12] And of course, we can bring that to a wider application, a return to a place of memories under the sovereignty of God enables us to realize that just as God has been with us in the past, so God will continue, we pray, continue to be with us in the present and in the future.

And in this act of returning to this building, that you are a witness of here and this, you who are seated here in the building itself, it certainly gives you a perspective, a perspective on the life of this congregation and indeed your life, your lives as individuals.

This is the building where God has been with his people in the past, with the promise of his abiding presence with, with us both now and in the future.

Yes, it's a place of memories, but it's a place where God has blessed this congregation, well, for nearly four decades now in this particular building. And we have this expectation of God's continued presence with his people, even here in this small corner.

This is the place where the Lord's people have gathered to worship, gathered to worship in fellowship, and in fellowship with God and with one another. And we pray that this will continue to happen for many, many more years to come.

[4 : 41] So we've returned to this special place of worship, this special place of fellowship. We pray that in this physical returning, whether it's you who are seated here, this physical presence in the building, or indeed whether you're still worshiping remotely, as it were, we pray that this physical return will actually speak to you the more in terms of a return to the one true God, a return with all your heart, having done with lesser things, and having that resolve to have that full, wholehearted commitment to serving the Lord, to giving your life to the Savior, to live sacrificially for him.

Now none of us, not one of us here, not one of us worshiping, can say that we're exempt from the call of God to return to him.

You each know, I know, you know, the sins of your heart, the sins of my heart. And we know that that need, we have that need to return to him with all our heart, with that devotion and commitment to the one who calls us to himself.

So God's calling his people to return to him. And it's a call that we read of and see so many times in Scripture. God calling his people to renounce their sins and to turn back to him.

And it's the call that we read here in the passage in Hosea, that call that speaks of repentance, that call to return, returning that involves repentance, that returning that involves turning, we might say, turning full circle away from our sin and turning fully to the one true God.

[6 : 27] So let's look at this call of God to return to him that we see, certainly initially in the first three verses, the call to repentance. Let's read these verses again.

Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take with you words and return to the Lord. Say to him, take away all iniquity, accept what is good, and we will pay with bulls the vows of our lips.

A threya shall not save us, we will not ride in horses, and we will say no more, our God, to the work of our hands. In you, the orphan finds mercy.

The people of Israel had sinned against God. They'd stumbled. They'd fallen through a lack of faith in the one true God. They'd failed to trust God politically.

They'd failed to trust him in preserving them from their enemies. And they'd failed to worship him fully as God had given them command how to worship him fully and wholly.

[7 : 35] The people of Israel had worshipped pagan gods instead of giving God full worship, full glory. And so for their frequent and persistent sin against God, God was going to send them into exile.

But at the same time, God was giving his people hope. Yes, they're going to be disciplined through exile, but they're not going to be abandoned by their covenant God.

Even at that critical time that we're reading here in Hosea, God's calling his people to turn from their iniquity, to turn back to God, and to turn from their sin.

And that turning to God and turning from sin that would result in God turning his anger away from his people and his people turning to enjoy God's blessing.

And it's that turning to God and turning from sin that we see in the passage that involves heart and voice and action. You see it expressed in these verses.

[8 : 40] Let's look at heart first of all. Because there has to be that sincere, heart-directed decision to return to God. God speaking to his people here, he's telling them, return with all your hearts, with all your mind.

To think in what he's commanding his people to do in order to respond with repentance. That repentance that's going to be evident in turning away from idols.

Idols that people had created with their own hands. And that repentance was going to be evident in the way that the people would no longer trust a pagan power like Assyria.

Instead, that the people would trust in the one true God. There'd have to be a voice expressing that repentance as well. And that evidence of true repentance would be seen in the way that the people responded by their voices.

Calling upon God in prayer. Calling upon God in confession. Expressing words of faith. Calling on God for his forgiveness. And asking God to accept what's good in offering up prayer to him.

[9 : 56] So heart and voice. And then action. The actions seen as demonstrating that the people are truly turned to God.

In other words, the offering up of sacrifices to appease God's wrath. That's what these words tell us. We will pay with bulls the vows of our lips.

Unless we've returned, or certainly some of us have returned to this church building to engage in corporate worship, to do it through a physical presence, a physical gathering with each other.

Pray that this, in many ways, would be a launchpad of a greater return. A return with all our hearts to God.

And accompany that return with that full confession of our sins before God. And to use your voice to express your wholehearted trust in him for everything.

[10:57] And yes, to confess your sins before him. Your failure, my failure, to trust in him for all things. And to show a genuine, true returning to God through sacrificial living.

A sacrificial offering up of yourself to God. To show that your faith is genuine faith, true faith, saving faith. Faith in the one who gave himself for us in sacrifice.

You know, this time of lockdown has given us all this opportunity to reflect on what's of true value. What's of true worth. What's of true importance in your life.

God's given us this time to examine your heart. And to call upon him in earnest prayer to forgive us our sins, to forgive you as sins that we committed as individuals, as Lord's people, and indeed as a nation.

God has given us this time to act in practice, to give our lives to him sacrificially, to serve him. So pray that in this return, this physical return to the church building, that this in fact is a reminder, a spur even, to act in these things and to have that full determination in your heart to return to the one who calls you to himself.

[12:24] And God's not going to turn away those who've turned to him and turned in full and true repentance of heart. God responds, as we see in verses 4 to 8, this confirmation of restoration.

And listen again to the voice of God speaking to his people. Listen as he declares what he will do to restore his people when they return to him.

And listen again to what the people shall become because of the loving kindness of God towards them. Let's read this with emphasis and listen with emphasis.

This is the word of God. I will heal their apostasy. I will love them freely for my anger has turned away from them. I will be like the dew to Israel.

He shall blossom like the lily. He shall take the root like the trees of Lebanon. His shoots shall spread out. His beauty shall be like the olive and his fragrance like Lebanon.

[13:32] They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow. They shall flourish like the grain. They shall blossom like the vine. Their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon.

Oh, Ephraim, what have I to do with idols? It's I who answer and look after you. I am an evergreen cypress for me. From me comes your fruit. Do you hear that emphasis?

God's speaking to his people. I will, I will and they shall, they shall. So God's announcing what will happen when his people return to him.

He will forgive them. He will turn to them. He will heal them. He'll heal their sickness of sin. He will turn away his anger from them and he will give them peace.

He will shower his love upon them and he'll transform them. In that beautiful language that we just read there from verse 4 to 8, we see there God promising his people such a change in their lives that they will become like fruitful plants.

[14:35] They'll become like blossoming vines. They'll be renowned for their faithfulness to God when before they were renowned for their backsliding. And in these verses we've read, we see a picture of God's dealings with his people who repent.

God's ways with his people, those who return back to God in full confession of sin and that full turning from sin and that turning to God.

God will not hold back his blessings upon his people, you who repent and return to him. As we saw there, God promises that he will act in response to his people's return to him.

As a consequence, his people shall know blessing upon blessing from God who blesses and blesses and blesses again.

And these promises of God of future and consequent blessing comes from the God who loves you, who loves undeserving sinners such as ourselves.

[15:44] And this is the God whom we're worshipping even now. This is the God whom we're worshipping here in this building together with you at home. Let's all in our hearts bow before God, the God, the Lord who's loved you and who's loved you with that everlasting love.

It's that love that announces that he heals our backsliding. That healing of turning to him and turning away from other gods.

That promise of healing, healing for our lack of faith and that healing to turn to him in fullness of love and fullness of joy because we worship the God of love.

that love that sent God's one and only son to die for sinners. It's that love that Jesus revealed when he called sinners to turn to him and turn and be saved.

It's that call of God's love that's still being uttered and still being heard and yes, in our own land and in other lands all over the world. So there's a challenge here.

[17 : 00] There's a challenge to respond wisely as we see in verse 9. Whoever is wise, let him understand these things. Whoever is discerning, let him know them.

For the ways of the Lord are right and the upright walk in them but transgressors stumble in them. You've heard this morning the word of God speaking to you to return to him.

You've heard the voice of God declare of his reward for the repentant sinner. You've been given, you've all been given that clear word that tells of God's blessing upon blessing, that grace upon grace for all who truly turn to God in full repentance of heart.

Yes, you've heard but have you listened to that voice of God? Have you engaged your mind as well as your heart and understanding the consequences of returning to God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength?

Because God's telling us here, he's saying that the person who's wise, the one who's wise, will understand what God's saying regarding the consequences of a full return to God.

[18 : 19] The consequences of blessing, the consequences of rejoicing of heart, the consequence of fruitful service for God. And it's that wisdom and discernment that comes not from worldly wisdom because worldly wisdom denies God.

It's that wisdom, that God-given wisdom that knows that God's ways are right and sure and just. Pray for that God-given wisdom, to follow him, to obey his word.

And you who claim to confess his name, who claim to know him, you'll show it by an upright walk as we see here. That living your life to the glory of God, seeking first his kingdom, getting your priorities right, having the joy of living in God's presence and doing so for the sake of his name and that name that's above all names.

But there's a warning here as Hosea closes this book. But transgressors will stumble in them because God's word tells us that if you reject God and his word, if you refuse to heed what God says and his word concerning that return to him, if you refuse to repent of your sins, then we're told and you know it happens.

You'll stumble. You'll fall. You'll be ruined because as God's word tells us, those who reject God's word will themselves be rejected by God.

[20 : 03] It's this word stumbling. It's a very apt word for any who refuse to return to God and turn to God. You know what it's like when you stumble. You stumble because you're not looking where you're going.

You don't see the thing before you that causes you to stumble and you carry on blindly and it's your own fault when you stumble and fall. Isn't that the case for any who won't see and hear and act upon the call of God to repent and to turn to him?

I mean, the people here in 8th century Israel, they'd closed their ears to God's word. They'd shut their eyes to what God had shown them in his word about returning to him.

And it's by their own guilt, it was their own fault, their own guilt that brought God's judgment on them. And then they stumbled and they fell.

We live in New Testament times when the voice of Jesus has been heard and continues to be heard. The voice that Jesus calls out to you to come to him, the one who is the way, the truth, and the life.

[21 : 14] That no one comes to the Father except through Jesus. And that call to turn, to turn away from your former ways and to live in the way that is the Lord Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life.

That way, that promise is given of eternal life for you who have turned to the Savior and turned from your former way of sin.

So we pray that even, even through the physical return, certainly of a section of the congregation this morning, a physical return to this building, we pray that there'll be even one, even more who this morning will turn to God, return to God, and give God his or her heart.

We pray, yes, through this physical return of the building, that each one of us will have that discernment of heart and mind, yes, to confess before God our sins, to confess our iniquities before him, to confess these indwelling sins that have so blighted our walk with the Lord, and that your life might be a life that's characterized by the beauty and fragrance that so poetically was described here in Hosea 14, that your life will be a life that is a beautiful life, a fragrant life, a life that reflects the beauty and fragrance of the Lord Jesus as you return to him, and in your return to him resolve,

don't look back, but have that commitment of heart not to return to your former ways, but to be that person that shines for the Lord Jesus as you live for him, as you act for him, as you speak for him, as you glorify him.

Amen. Let us pray. Our Lord and our God, our gracious and loving Heavenly Father, we pray, Lord, that your word will not return to you empty, but accomplish what you desire.

[23 : 28] may it be, Lord, that in this physical return to this building that we will surely know and exercise that true return to you, and that there might be one even here this morning who gives his or her life to you in turning to you and turning away from sin.

Lord, hear us as we continue in worship before you now, and we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. God bless you