



RETURNING TO GOD

SERIES: STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

Catalog No. 1074
 Zechariah 1:1-6
 Fourth Message
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 July 14th, 1996

As we come to the book of Zechariah this morning in our studies in the Minor Prophets, I want to begin by reading parts of a remarkable essay, written by a high school senior as part of his application to enter Stanford University. This young man demonstrates amazing clarity of thought and purpose for a teenager, and unusual boldness in trying to impress a secular institution with one's faith. He influenced my life spiritually when I was a junior in high school, pointing me toward God as much as anyone I knew. The essay was a response to the question: "If you were to write a book, what would it be and why."

If I were to write a book, it would most likely be on the value of becoming a Christian. Becoming a Christian is not simply a pledge to read the Bible or to go to church, but it is a change. This change is present spiritually, mentally, and physically. Becoming a Christian means asking Jesus Christ into your life as your personal Savior. This is done not only because you need Him and His forgiveness, but because you wish to fellowship with Him in order to truly live the abundant life that God has given us all.

The acquisition of a strong faith in God, which results from asking Christ to take hold of one's life, will clear away all the unnecessary parts that have been storing themselves deep inside one's inner self. Committing yourself to the Lord is similar to having a million tons of worry, doubt, and guilt lifted from your shoulders. It can only be described as the most beautiful feeling of total freedom ever felt.

My friend wrote this twenty years ago. In the last eighteen years, drugs have gripped his life and ravaged his self-image. Isolated from people, and seemingly unteachable, he survives. Obsessions, compulsions and fear lay fierce claim on him. What would I say to him if he were to ask me for help? Is there hope?

More recently, is there hope for a neighbor of mine to turn from the isolation and hopelessness of alcoholism? This man has lived his life alienating himself from anyone who tried to get close to him. He never had children. Now his wife has had a stroke and is gone. He is entirely alone. Recently he confided that he once called himself a Christian, but now he wonders what God thinks of the way he lived his rough-edged life. As he drove away from my house, with tears in his eyes, he said he would like to talk more about it sometime. Can a man turn to God when he is eighty?

Perhaps we all know stories like these. Perhaps the

stories are our own. We have seasons of humiliation and defeat. We are ravaged by the effects of sin. We know deep discouragement resulting from sin patterns that are habitual, generational, and escalating, debilitating and deceiving patterns that we have allowed to take up residence for a long time. Does God ever decide to not pursue us anymore? Does he stop crying to us to return to him? Where is a word of encouragement from God for us?

Fortunately, we know a God who takes the first step into situations like these. He breaks into space and time and brings his Word. God *always* initiates and awaits our response. The first creative act of his Word brought forth the heavens and the earth and every living thing. He came to Abraham to call out a people for himself. The Word became flesh, and dwelt as one of us.

This truth about God is what Zechariah's message reminds us about first. Chapter 1, verses 1,2:

In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah the prophet, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo, saying, "The Lord was very angry with your fathers." (Zech 1:1-2, NASB)

The name Zechariah means "God remembers." In fact, the text gives the names of his father and grandfather in the priestly line: "son of Berechiah", "son of Iddo." These names, strung together, mean: "God remembers, God blesses, at the appointed time." Already we see a hint of encouragement to a discouraged people who probably felt forgotten. Had God had turned his back? No. God raised up a messenger, Zechariah—"God remembers."

The Darius mentioned was the current ruler, a Persian. He was the second Persian king after Cyrus, the one who overtook the Babylonian empire and allowed Israel to return to Jerusalem, in 537 B.C., and rebuild its temple. The mention of a Persian ruler reminds us of what has taken place. Israel was not under self-rule. What had happened?

God's people continued to delight in the world's idols and false gods and did not return to relationship with him. The steps they took were further and further away from him. God repeatedly reminded, warned, cried, and sent messengers (prophets). Hosea, Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and others repeated the refrain to turn from worthless idols and worship the true God.

But they refused to listen. Consequences from life became their teacher. Captivity resulted, courtesy of godless people. Limitation, defeat, disillusionment, discouragement and dislocation defined their lives for a generation. In short, exile was utter humiliation for a people who thought it could never happen to them.

God was angered by idolatry and stubborn hearts. God was angry with the exiles' fathers, and their fathers, and generations before that. In fact, every generation since the Exodus had fallen out of covenant.

Idolatry is what draws us away from God and seduces us. It can be career, fantasy, ministry, self-protection, preoccupation with money. Idolatry isn't merely blatant hero worship or having a personal psychic. It is the seeking of something other than God to satisfy one's desires.

John Calvin said: "our hearts are idol factories." The apostle John, who tenderly calls the recipients of his first letter "little children," finishes the letter with the warning: "little children, guard yourself from idols."

What are your values that are idols displacing God from the heart of your life?

The Old Testament has no problem attributing anger to God. God is angry, and also jealous, for his creation, his laws and his covenant people (see verse 14). The expression of this anger is the discipline of a loving parent who cannot rescue his child from the natural consequences of his choices. Limitation, destruction, alienation: all these were part of exile—and they are part of the outworking of God's anger in our lives due to our refusal to turn from worthless pursuits.

It is interesting that the name given for God here is the covenant name Yahweh, or, the Lord. The anger of God, expressed in destructive consequences, still does not invalidate God's loyal love or his determination to woo us into relationship.

Only 42,000 returned to Jerusalem, in 536 BC, with the prophets Zechariah and Haggai. They were greeted by the sight of desolation: a burned-out heap of a temple, ruins and rubble everywhere. Imagine the sight. Could images of the war in Sarajevo be similar to a returning Sarajevan resident?

Sixteen years later (in our passage) the temple is being rebuilt. But the work is slow. A spirit of pessimism and discouragement was beginning to set in. Remodeling and reconstruction projects are always like that. They are never on schedule. After all, Israel was still the pawn of Persia, and subject to all the godless nations around them. There was no sign of Messiah. There was little hope for future. Even when the temple was finished, five years later, in 515 BC, the disappointment was greater than the joy, because the temple did not measure up to the old one. The book of Ezra tells us:

Yet many of the priests and the Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the founda-

tion of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy; so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout for joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away (Ezra 3:12-13).

Certainly, some of our lives are involved in reconstruction. We see the ruins of once beautiful lives, and we are picking up the pieces. But this season can end. There can always be a fresh start. Like children, we need reassurance after discipline. Who will reassure us that the covenant love of God is still in force? God will. He initiates the contact. He always does. We are responders.

God's word breaks in here with the central message of Zechariah. Verse 3:

"Therefore say to them, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Return to Me,' declares the Lord of hosts, 'that I may return to you,' says the Lord of hosts. (1:3)

The key word in this passage is "return." It frames the passage, since it is repeated in verse 6b, where it is translated "repent." It is a call to return to God from humiliating exile and worthless idols, to return to the covenant relationship with God in the center. "Return, return, return!" was the refrain of the prophets in the north and south. Jeremiah uses "return" one hundred and eleven times; the word is used more than a thousand times in the Old Testament. Even eighty-seven years later, in Malachi 3:7, God is still pleading to Israel to "return to Me"—although the temple has already been built. If God had temple-building work in mind only, he would be satisfied already and not pleading for a return of their hearts.

God is inviting his beloved to return to relationship with him. God remembers his promises, his covenant. But turning one hundred and eighty degrees to face God honestly is both the simplest and most difficult thing for our stubborn wills, intelligent minds, and busy bodies to do.

A man who came to Dr. Larry Crabb for help answered Dr. Crabb's question, "How can I help you?" with, "I want to feel better, quick." Blunt, honest, and superficial. Yet, isn't that what we really want so we can circumvent God? "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God," Crabb says. We want our problems to be fixed more than we want God. But God does not exist to improve our lives. We exist to enter into his life.

We sometimes equate returning to God with:

- * expensive counseling from professionals
- * the latest popular Christian book
- * an extremely disciplined quiet time regimen
- * doing some good, hard work for God
- * counting on time to heal all wounds
- * sitting under an evangelical "expert" celebrity

- * the excitement and inspiration of a stadium rally or seminar movement
- * the cause of the political right
- * serving the Lord earnestly in ministry opportunities.

All of these things can be good individually, but all too often we are doing them *before turning* to God or *instead of turning* to God. They may be done without the brokenness and humility required to turn and face God and say, "Here I am, Lord." And this begins by intentionally turning toward him and turning away from the religious and idolatrous things that keep us from him.

The second half of this key verse says: "*and I will return to you.*" It seems, then, that God says we must make the first move, then he will respond. But it is not saying that. Remember, God's Word begins the process, initiating dialogue with us after we have wandered away from him. We respond by returning, then he meets us and draws near. God chooses not to barge in. He says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." He does not crash in forcibly.

And when you turn, you will find that God is close—closer than you think. God is always near, no matter how far we feel we have strayed from him. We naturally assume the distance back to God is equally as long as our drift away from him. But that is wrong. The moment we turn, God meets us there. That is what he is waiting for.

This is illustrated in the story of the prodigal son. The son's words to his father, "Give me what is coming to me, now," while the father was yet living, were tantamount to saying he would rather he was dead. He rudely asks for his portion of the inheritance, and leaves. After some time, the son gets to the point where he is humiliated, hungry, and repentant. He returns and wants to work for his father. But he finds a celebration in his honor, treating him as a noble, full son of privilege. Extravagant, surprising love awaited him. He finds a father who longingly looked for him every day, and runs recklessly to kiss him and draw him near. God draws near to us with an unexpected freeing, healing love the moment we turn toward home, honestly in need.

We see from this word that God also desires supremely relationship, not ritual. He says: "Return to Me." Not to religious activity, good behavior or works, his law or a new way of life. God desires to establish personal relationship. It is not enough for God to have you return to live under his roof. His desire is to have a close, personal relationship.

Although we accept God's invitation to return and find him near, we are still prone to wander away. As the hymn puts it: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, / Prone to leave the God I love." Zechariah now reveals four instructions, four warnings for wandering hearts, to keep us from being lured away from God again. Verses 4-6:

"Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets proclaimed, saying, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Return now from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.' But they did not listen or give heed to Me,' declares the Lord. 'Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? But did not My words and My statutes, which I commanded My servants the prophets, overtake your fathers? Then they repented and said, 'As the Lord of hosts purposed to do to us in accordance with our ways and our deeds, so He has dealt with us.''" (1:4-6)

The first warning is this: *Break from the unhealthy influences of past generations before they break you.*

This is *not* saying to deny or dishonor your parents. It is saying you do not have to repeat their dysfunction. At some point we must choose to stand apart from our parents in areas where they may have been blinded to God's way.

The second warning is: *Listen to God's Word before you lose the capacity to hear.*

The fathers had a hearing problem. The text says: "They did not listen or give heed to." We could easily miss this. But this is an important concept. It means more than they "tuned out." Actually, they chose to hear *only*. They were merely going through the motions. But listening requires both hearing and responding to what you have heard. If you do not obey, you have not heard.

More than that, hearing is being attentive, inclining the ear. In the old E. F. Hutton commercials, everyone leaned forward to catch even a whisper or movement or word of wisdom. We need to be like this with God, straining to discern his voice from scripture or the nudge of his Spirit inside us.

Our listening skills are terrible today because we fight against a visually-oriented culture, not an oral one, which would force us to hear and memorize. We access information on the Internet so we don't have to listen well or be truly "present" when we are with someone. This tendency carries over to our relationship with God.

Hearing a sermon on Sunday morning isn't enough to withstand the culture we live in or resist our own misguided thoughts. We need to create space to pray and read God's words. Prayer is listening to God. If Jesus listened to the Father, how much more do we need to?

Sadie and Bessie Delany, the "one hundred something" sisters who have lived together their entire lives, share about their mother's "sweet hour of prayer," in their most recent book:

We set aside time every day to talk to the Lord. We got that habit from Mama. She had a full-time job running the school, plus ten children to raise, but there was never a day in her life that she didn't reserve one full hour to pray. She had a beautiful writ-

ing desk where she kept her special things, like her own Bible and prayer book. Above it were two pictures of her heroes—Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass—and when she sat down between them, we knew we had to leave her alone. That was her hour with the Lord.

Do our children see us spending time listening to God?

Here is the third warning: *Seek the truth of God's Word or it will seek you out.*

A double rhetorical question from God stresses what should be our foundation: God's Word. It is not fathers; they are dead in Babylon. The Word outlasts and supercedes God's messengers. They (righteous men) pass away. Do not revere them. Revere the Word of God. In fact, it always catches up to us. We can't outrun it. We can run but we can't hide. The word "overtake" is a hunting term. The Word *will* hunt you down. Truth always pursues until it overtakes.

And the fourth warning: *Be teachable before consequences teach you.*

The text says, "then they repented"—and agreed that God was right and just in his commands and discipline. The exiled people had no choice but to recognize they were deluded, and admit failure. They had to confess.

The text teaches us two things about the nature of repentance. First, we must get to the point where we cease making excuses, maneuvering, and negotiating.

Young children are gifted negotiators of consequences to bad behavior. Sometimes I think my four-year-old has been listening to the "art of negotiating" tapes at night. He is constantly deflecting attention from the real behavioral issue of defiance. He is constantly in motion, a moving target. Anne and I long for him to stop, face us, and say: "I'm sorry. I was wrong." God longs for the same thing from us, but all too often we are in motion, maneuvering.

The second thing is: Do not wait for consequences to be your teacher. Confess, repent, become teachable, pliable. Confession releases power to make a fresh start. Preventative maintenance is always better than corrective.

The idols today are strong. Returning to God is not just for addicts and alcoholics. And it is not something that has to be done just once. We must return to God and keep returning.

God knows it is the only place where we will find the resources to handle life and quench our thirst with Living Water. Jeremiah 2:13 says: "What injustice did your fathers find in Me that they went far from Me?...My people have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to dig for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." The idols of the world and other sources of refreshment will not satisfy. Are you thirsty? Have you forsaken your God?

It is time to return to the Father, or as James put it: "draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (4:8).

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