

Return to Me and I Will Return to You

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[0 : 00] And tonight we're going to read from Zechariah chapter 1 verses 1 to 6. And this is the word of the Lord Almighty, which he has referred to over and over throughout Zechariah. In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, son of Berechiah, the son of Edu. The Lord was very angry with your forefathers. Therefore, tell the people, this is what the Lord Almighty says. Return to me, declares the Lord Almighty, and I will return to you, says the Lord Almighty. Do not be like your forefathers, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed, this is what the Lord Almighty says. Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices. But they would not listen or pay attention to me, declares the Lord. Where are your forefathers now? And the prophets, do they live forever?

[1 : 07] But did not my words and my decrees, which I commanded my servants, the prophets, overtake your forefathers? Then they repented and said, the Lord Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve, just as he determined to do. Well, it was October, November, 520 years before Jesus was born, and the word of the Lord came to Zechariah. Zechariah. The book of Zechariah didn't start with Zechariah. It started with the Lord. He didn't think of something really, Zechariah didn't think real hard and try to come up with something to say. 2 Peter says, prophecy never had its origin in the will of man. But men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. 1 Peter says, the prophets spoke of the grace that was to come to you. And the prophets searched intently, trying to find out the time and the circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings and the glories that would follow.

[2 : 27] It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you when they spoke. So it was the Spirit of Christ in Zechariah. And Zechariah knew that he wasn't just speaking for him and his generation. He was speaking to us, to those who the salvation has been revealed to. And so what was Zechariah's first word to the people in Jerusalem? What was the Lord's first word to them? It was return to me and I will return to you. And so when the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, discouragement was everywhere. We looked at that last week. Everyone was discouraged. They were a stuck people. There were economic problems. There were political problems. There were spiritual problems.

[3 : 26] And it seemed like the sins of their parents would haunt them forever, that they would never escape the shadow of what their parents had done. So they were stuck. And I don't think it takes much imagination or maybe even much personal experience in the Christian life to know that when you are stuck and when you are discouraged, it becomes very easy to turn away from the Lord.

And that's when they turned away from the Lord. Remember, they had started to build the temple and now all they had was a foundation. And there it sat for 20 years.

Sat. And they were stuck. And it was bad enough that they were leaving the temple of the Lord to sit. They had turned their attention to their own houses.

They turned themselves away from what God wanted them to do. And now they were spending all their time and energy on building their own lives back. Haggai, you remember, we said that he's sort of Zechariah's prophet partner.

He was in Jerusalem at the same time, prophesying to the people. And Haggai says to the people, or the Lord through Haggai says, Why all this drought?

[4 : 45] Why all this ruin? Why are you so financially strapped all the time? And he says, Isn't it because while my house is in a ruin, you are busy building your own houses?

You're busy putting up the paneling and redoing things and redoing the porch and redoing the roof and adding out wings and redoing the paint. You're fixing up the outside. You're finishing the basement.

And meanwhile, my house is in ruins. So they gave themselves to their own houses.

And they ignored the Lord's house. They gave themselves to their own agenda and their own kingdoms. And they left God's kingdom to wait.

And so they turned to outward things and they left their relationship with God to wither away. Now, again, isn't that something or sometimes the story of our life?

[5 : 52] This is not something that is so peculiar to them that we can't understand or relate to. In our discouragement and in our spiritual depression, it becomes very easy for us to drift away from the Lord.

Drift away from God in our hearts. And so we walk away. Back to the old way of life. Back to the old way. As I was just reading and meditating on this passage, I kept thinking of Peter.

Do you remember Peter? After he had denied the Lord and there was the resurrection and the Lord had met Peter. But it seems apparent from John that Peter was still very discouraged.

And I think Peter was thinking, the Lord is done with me. I must have crossed some line and the Lord is not going to use me anymore. And so there he was.

And John says, one day Peter says, I'm going fishing. And I think that's very significant because that's what Peter was doing before he ever met Jesus. That was before Peter ever heard, I'm going to make you a fisher of men.

[7 : 05] So Peter's going back to his old life. What he was before Jesus. And Peter must be thinking, I'm stuck.

But Jesus wasn't done with him, was he? He met him and he helped him. But we can do the very same thing. In the midst of our discouragement, in the midst of our hopelessness, we can try to cope with that stuckness in directing our attention and directing our hearts, not to the Lord, but away.

And we can find ways of coping without including the Lord. And so we have hours of TV or hours of YouTube or house projects or work projects or financial projects or working out.

We find things to work on when we're not working on our relationship with the Lord. And those things might be in and of themselves just fine and good, but they have subtly crept in and become substitutes for God.

And so to them and to us, God says, return to me. Return to me. And I'll return to you. So renewal.

[8 : 22] Revival. It begins with repentance. That's what these folks in Zechariah's time needed. They needed revival. They needed renewed. They needed lifted out.

They needed to get going. And remember, Zechariah got them going again. God revived them. But it began with this word of repentance. Of repents.

And so that is our first point. Repentance is foundational. Repentance is foundational. It's foundational to private spiritual renewal.

Being made new or freshened up in the Christian life. It begins with repentance. And so do you need personally, spiritually revived?

Unstuck. Well, it begins with these words. Return to me. Return to me. Octavius Winslow. We're going through one of his books in the adult Sunday school.

[9 : 21] He has another book called, and it has a whopper of a title, but it's really good. It's called Personal Declension and the Revival of Religion in the Soul. And it's worth its weight in gold.

If Amazon had six stars, I'd give it six stars. And so after tracing out spiritual declension, spiritual decline, spiritual backsliding, he turns his attention and he says, now how do we get out of that?

And he gives three steps. And it's very much return to me. Winslow says, step number one, examine yourself. This is part of returning to God, is looking at your situation, looking at your soul, looking inside.

The prodigal son had to come to his senses and begin looking at his condition. Like he was sitting there in the slop, eating, wanting to eat the pig's food, and he didn't have a clear grasp of just how far he had fallen and what was at home.

He didn't recognize his condition. And then he came to his senses and he looked at himself. He got a good sense of where he was. And how far he had fallen. Examine yourself.

[10 : 39] Step number two, find out what caused your soul's declension. Find out why you're stuck. What love has taken over? What idol is on the throne of your heart?

Why aren't you trusting? What aren't you trusting? What are you giving to as something better than or other than God? So find that love. Find that distraction. Maybe it's a sin.

Maybe it's a perfectly good thing that has elevated itself in your heart. So search. So it's not only examine yourself, but look for what is eating away at the root of your Christianity, the root of your faith.

Find that worm that's down there eating at your heart. And then he says, step number three, take that, whatever it is, take that worm and take it immediately to the throne of grace.

Take it immediately to the throne of grace and lay it before the Lord. Don't just examine yourself. Don't just find out why you are the way you are, what's causing it.

[11 : 50] Don't find out. Don't just find out what is causing your discouragement. Immediately take it to the throne of grace and lay it before the Lord. Confess it. Ask for help.

Ask for grace to kill it. Ask for mercy. Ask for forgiveness. And so in Zechariah's words, return. Return to the Lord. And that's where renewal begins.

That's where it begins privately. It begins with repentance. It's foundational. Repentance is foundational to every reviving work of God, no matter on what scale we're talking about.

So that's a very private, individual thing. But what was the gunshot? What was the breach that broke the dam at the time of the Reformation?

And that was, in historical terms, the greatest ongoing revival. Well, we say Luther nailed, remember, Luther nailed those 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church.

[13:00] And so it was for an academic debate. He didn't mean to start the Reformation. And we should never imagine Luther striding up to the door with fire in his eyes, thinking, I'm going to bring the Roman Catholic Church down.

It wasn't like that. The doors were sort of like the community bulletin board. So rather than striding up with fire, imagine him striding up to the library bulletin board and putting on the 95 theses for someone, hopefully, that will debate these with me.

And so we have to be very clear. It wasn't Luther's bravado that began the Reformation. It was what God did when he took what Luther wrote.

And the first thing that Luther had down on the paper was, our Lord and Master, when he says repent, he desires the whole life of believers should be repentance.

And then number two and number three and number four all make it clear that he's attacking this false idea that had come to roost in the church, where you had this sort of church-regulated, church-governed, church-cooked-up sort of penance.

[14:19] And if you didn't want to do that, you could pay your way out of it. And Luther said, no, repentance has to be here.

And it can't just be this one thing and you just make one payment and that's good. No, it's your whole life. It has to be in your heart. It's not just doing some things. It's an inward change. And that was the word that the Lord took as a sword and plunged into people's hearts and spread like wildfire.

And it was heart-level repentance. And so when that word got into people's hearts and it began to shine, it worked revival and renewal.

It was foundational. And that's what it was for Zechariah and Zechariah's day. Zechariah begins with repentance. Because that's how a revived relationship with God always begins.

And so just before we move on to our second point, we need to take this as a lesson. We can never expect God to act in our church, in our country, in our own personal lives, unless repentance is preached and repentance is believed.

[15:39] And so we as pastors, we must preach sermons calling people to repent, to return to God, to turn around. Because there's no work of God that doesn't begin by calling men and women and boys and girls to return to the Lord, to turn away from their sin.

And so what do boys and girls need to do to be saved? They need to turn around and come to God. It's an about-face.

It's a clean break of everything, of all sin. It's not just the sins that you mind letting go and that you don't have much problems with. It's the sins that you love. Those are the sins that you have to lay down and leave and turn to God.

And so you go from loving and tolerating and cooperating with sin to hating it, to despising it, to fighting it. And so parents, we need to talk to our children about repentance.

And Sunday school teachers, we need to talk to our students about repentance. repentance. We must confront our students with God's demand to return to me.

[16:54] And if we don't do that, no matter what else we do, if we don't do that, we might as well just be giving them a friendly wave as they walk on to hell.

Because repentance is that man that gets in the way and stops them. Nothing else will be honored by God. It's a hard word, but it's where God starts.

But it's not just a word to the lost, is it? It's a word to every sinner. And that reaches out its arms and gathers all of us. Because we are all still sinners.

And so do you want to get unstuck Christian? Do you want to go on and go further and make some great advancement in your Christian life? Or do you want revived, is what I'm saying?

Here's the firm rock where you start. If you're stuck in the mud, put your foot here. God says, return to me. Put your foot down and launch off of that.

[17 : 55] So that's our first main point. Repentance is foundational. Second main point. Repentance is relational. It's relational. Now, it's not just an impersonal thing.

It's not something that I just do with myself. It's not even something that I do with my sin. Between me and my sin. Or between me and my good deeds. It's relational.

Now, why do I say that? What is there in Zechariah, in those words, that would make me say, you know what? We have to catch this, that repentance is relational.

Because what does the Lord say to them? Return to me. The Lord is taking this personally. He's saying, you have to get to me.

Return to me. The prodigal son didn't repent when he stopped partying and stopped doing what he had been doing. He repented when he came back to the Father. And so, dear believer or dear lost person, the call to repent is a call to have a relationship with God.

[19 : 08] It's closing the distance between you and God. It's personal. It's relational. And that's why God doesn't only fault their forefathers for their evil deeds. He does fault them for that.

But he says, they didn't listen to me. Now, husbands, how good is your relationship with your wife going to be if you don't listen to her?

Or wives, vice versa. Listening is a relationship thing, isn't it? One of the things that we have to learn to do so much in our marriages is I need to learn to listen.

We all can come out talking, but we need to learn to listen and understand. And so, when we are stuck in our sin, let me ask you, are we listening to God?

If we're just stuck there in our sin, are we listening to God? Well, we might be hearing him. We might be knowing what he's talking about. We might know what he wants. But are we listening?

[20 : 09] Are we dialed in? Are we saying, I've got to respond to that? When we're listening to our husbands or when we're listening to our wives, we're not just hearing what they're saying.

We're dialed in and we're looking for an appropriate response, aren't we? That's what listening is. And they didn't listen. So, not listening is a relationship, personal problem.

And they needed to return to God. Now, how do you do that except in your heart? You close the distance in your heart. Yeah, they needed to show. They did need to show their repentance by their good deeds.

They needed to show their repentance by getting to work on the temple. There was a concrete thing that the people of Israel needed to do to express their repentance.

But, it was personal first. God's saying, it's not good enough to just go work on the temple. You have to get to me. You have to return to me.

[21 : 12] It's heart religion first. So, how's your heart religion doing? Do you have heart religion?

Are you close to the Lord? Or are you far away? God says, return to me. I don't care what you've done.

I don't care how long it's been. I don't care how far you've wandered. Return. Return to me. And if we hear those words, God's arms are still open to us.

And if we will return, He will return to us. Well, our second main point, that's it, is repentance is not just external. It's not just something that happens inside of me.

It's relational. The Lord considers it personal to Him. Between God and us.

[22:09] Now, the third point is this. Repentance has a promised response. Repentance has a promised response.

Return to me, and I'll return to you. What a glory. What a wonder. That after we've gone so far away, God says, now if you return to me, I'll return to you.

So, yeah, you're stuck in your sin. Yeah, you're stuck in your unbelief. Yes, you haven't been listening to me, but I'm still waiting to receive you.

And if you come to me, I will come to you. I'll meet you. So, again, the prodigal son. Did the father wait for the son to go all the way? No. When he saw that son a long way off, he saw him.

Because he had been looking. And he was out on the porch every day looking. And when he saw his son coming down the road far away, he ran and met him. When you return to me, I'll return to you.

[23:13] I'm waiting to receive you. And that's our God. He's not a standoffish. He's not a wait. He's a waiting on the porch, running to his people kind of God.

And we have to believe that about him. We have to believe that about his heart. And if we've been sending in our sin or if we've been stuck for a long time, that is the one thing, that's the one hurdle that is, if we can get over that hurdle and we can believe that God is the kind of God that will return to me, we will return to him.

We have to believe it. So why do some people stay far away? And they have such a hard time returning. Why do some people go on hiding or coping with their sin and keeping that distance?

And why do some people come with their sin and say, here I am. This is what I've done. Why do some people stay away from the throne of grace and others immediately go right to it?

Well, because some don't think God will return to them. And others know that he will. Some think that God is like the older brother in the prodigal son story instead of like the father.

[24:24] And some think that God returning is an iffy thing. But some believe this promise. And some don't believe that God is kind and merciful. And others know that he is.

So faith in God's goodness always inspires, it always encourages, it always pushes people towards repentance.

You know how you can know that you believe that God is good and God is great, that God is the kind of God that the Bible pictures him as and portrays him as? It's because you will repent.

Some people are so afraid of God they don't repent. They'd rather cope with sin in their own way. But how can you know that you are believing the God of the Bible?

It's because you will come with your sin. That's the audacity of faith. You will come with your sin, owning it all, and saying, this is what I've done and I believe you will return to me.

[25:26] So here's God saying, there's no reason to stay stuck. There's no reason to stay stuck. There's no reason at all in your spiritual depression. You return to me and I'll return to you.

We'll be good again. It will be all right. I will forgive you. I will love you. You can move right back in. I can... So repentance has this promised response.

Now, are you close to the kingdom of God? Are you on the edge and saying, I'm thinking, I'm wavering, I'm thinking about my soul, I'm not sure what to do.

Well, all I can say is, here's God's promise to you that if you return to Him, if you go to Him, He'll return to you. And so you can take this promise.

Whether you're a believer and you need to get out of your sin or you're an unbeliever and you want to come to Jesus for the very first time, you can take this promise and you can take it right to God.

[26 : 27] It's like taking the check to the bank. You can show the signature and say, God, you have said. This is what you said you would do. You said, if I return, you'll return to me.

You said, you'll come close to me. You said, you'll forgive me. And maybe you'll say, I can never say something like that. I can never be so bold. But that's what saving faith does. Saving faith holds God to His word.

He said He'll do it. And won't He do it? Won't He do it? Yeah, He will.

He's never turned a single person away yet. And why in the world would He make the promise if He intended to break it every other time? Repentance has a promised response.

Now here's the fourth lesson. Repentance is taking God's word seriously. Repentance is taking God's word seriously.

[27 : 32] And it's especially taking God's word of judgment seriously. It's taking all of God's word seriously. But in this context, He's speaking especially about God's word of judgment.

Is it right for people to be afraid of God's judgment and to repent because of it? Yeah, that is what repentance does. It takes God's word seriously.

In verses 4 through 6, God says, Now let's remember your forefathers. You remember those. You remember them. Let's remember them.

Remember, What did they do with my word? Are you going to do any different? What did they do with my word? I spoke to them. And again, Charlie pointed this out.

How many times? I, the Lord Almighty, spoke to them. I'm not some little regional deity. I'm the King of Heaven. I spoke to them. I told them to turn from their evil ways.

[28 : 31] I told them to return to me. But they wouldn't listen. They wouldn't pay attention to my words. That's what they did.

What happened? Did they survive God's word? Did they survive? Were they able to escape it? Did they somehow outlive it?

Well, Zechariah, or the Lord says, Where are they? They're dead. And even the prophets who spoke it, They're dead. But verse 6 says, Didn't my words overtake your forefathers?

Didn't I say they would be destroyed? Where are they now? Are they destroyed? And all Zechariah's listeners had to do was lift up their head and look around.

And there's the temple. There's the walls. There's everything in ruin. All around them was God's word come true.

[29 : 41] All around them was God's word overtaking their forefathers. The walls are destroyed. The cities in ruins. The temple is nothing but a foundation in the midst of this pile of rubble. And where are all the people?

Jerusalem went to a great city. To a very small city. The whole region. I don't think I mentioned this last week. The whole little province of Judah.

50,000 people. That's how many people are in Marshall County. Where are they all? God's word overtook them.

So picture a wolf. You've seen those documentaries. The wolf breaks off that baby elk. And the baby elk can stay away for a little while.

And then the wolves finally close in and trip them. And overtake them. And devour them. The forefathers didn't take God's word seriously.

[30 : 42] But repentance is when you begin to take what God is saying seriously. And until then, you're not.

Hudson Taylor said, there is a living God. He has spoken in the Bible. And he means what he says. Amen. And what had he said?

Unless you repent, you will likewise perish. And so he's saying, don't be like them. Don't be like them.

Listen to me. Listen to what I'm saying. Return to me. Repentance is taking God's word seriously. And number five. Repentance is owning God's justice.

The fairness of God. It's owning God's justice. You notice that in the second half of verse six. Then they repented.

[31 : 45] He's talking about Zechariah's hearers, I believe. Then they repented and said, The Lord Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve. Just as he determined to do.

So there the people are. And there's, he's saying, they're saying, what happened to our forefathers? That's what we deserved.

They went away. We're going astray. They repented and said, he's done to us what our practices deserve. When you repent, you don't have anything good to say for yourself.

It's actually fairly easy to tell if someone is really repenting. If someone is really repenting, they don't have much good to say for themselves.

They're not hedging their wrongs with their excuses and their arguments. They know they've done wrong.

[32 : 58] They own it. And they don't make lame excuses for it. A real repenter will say what these people said. The Lord Almighty has done what our ways and our practices deserve.

We did wrong. God punished us. We deserved it. And so for us, when we come in saving faith, or when we come again for the 300th time or the 5,000th time, Lord, I've sinned, we don't come with our arguments.

We come with saying, this is my sin. I don't deserve mercy. I don't. I deserve judgment.

And it would be completely fair if you were to judge me. So where does renewal, where does revival begin? How do you get unstuck?

Well, you quit making excuses, and you quit cutting yourself slack, and you honestly say, I don't deserve mercy. Lord, I deserve judgment. And so God's salvation begins when we own up to all that we are and all that we've done.

[34 : 07] And that's the hardest thing of all, because we all want to be our own justifiers, don't we? We all want to somehow say, I'm really right, because we all want to say why it was okay for me, or why you don't understand, or why I don't deserve all of this.

But that's not repentance, and that's not saving faith, because saving faith is saying, I haven't done it. You said do this, and I did the exact opposite.

I do deserve it. But saving faith says, God, you say that you justify the ungodly. Romans 4, verse 5, he justifies the ungodly, he justifies the wicked.

And again, that's the audacity of faith, because everywhere else you look, it's going to be like, God gives heaven to people that are pretty good. But saving faith says, I'm not pretty good, I'm bad.

And it says, Lord, will you forgive me? And saving faith, God then justifies us. And so there's nothing to do except own up to your sin.

[35 : 21] Own up to your failures. And say, well, this is the deal for me. The gospel is the deal for me. God's mercy is the deal for me. Here's a plan that will work for me. You know, we like, I mean, there might be other plans out there, but they don't work for me.

To do everything right and get into heaven, that's a plan, but it doesn't work for me, because I've already blown it. And there's no way I'm going to be able to do it in the future. That's not a deal that will work for me. But here's a plan that will work for every sinner.

Christ takes my sin, I'll take his righteousness. He'll pay for my sin, and I'll take that reward that he deserves. Well, that's a deal that will work for me, because all I have to give is my sin.

And if that seems too good to be true, that's what God says, and I'll take him at his word. So be it. I'll take it. And verse 6 says they repented.

They repented. So they owned it up. They owned up to what they had done. They owned up to what they deserved. They repented.

[36 : 26] They returned to God. And now the rest of Zechariah begins. And now the great visions, and the rebuilding, and the great promises, and the coming king, and the gentle king riding on a donkey, and the shepherd getting struck for his sheep, and the coming of God, and God destroying the nations, and then entering into the new world of even heaven.

That's where Zechariah goes from here. But this is where Zechariah begins. This is where the Christian life begins. This is where God and man begin to have a relationship.

When God speaks and man repents. So do you need a do-over? Do you need to get unstuck and moving again?

Do you want to launch into a new life with God? Repent. Return to God. Return because God says he'll return to you.

Repent because God means what he says. And own what you've done. Cry out for mercy.

[37 : 45] That's how you get unstuck. That's how you get going again. That's how you launch into a new kind of life with God. And so beginning here, God begins to show Zechariah, this is what I'm going to do with these people.

And it's an amazing and it's a glorious picture. But it begins with repent. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, will you please show us where we've slipped up and slipped away?

Will you show us where we are stuck and where we are blind and where we are caught up by the sin that so easily entangles and where we've been duped by the world and we don't even know it yet?

Show us ourselves. Show us our hearts. Show us our condition. And then show us how good and your promises, how good you are and how your promises meet us.

And so encourage us to repent. I pray that everyone here would repent. Would find out that sin and turn away from it.

[39 : 04] And continue to fight it. Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you are this good shepherd that so gently and so powerfully lead your sheep.

I pray that you would lead the sheep. And I pray that you would wake up and open the eyes of those who are lost and who need you.

Thank you that you are found by those who are not looking for you. So come and invade their lives, invade their hearts, and change them, and completely alter their final destiny, and completely alter their life as it is now, and become the center for them.

Pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.