

6. Returning to the Lord

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I don't know about you, my wife Karen and I would like to travel. We like to go somewhere where we can relax. Many times, it is nothing more than a wishful thinking, but we still can hope. Whether we travel together or separately, whenever we come back to our home, we are glad to be back to our own home, own bed and own kitchen even though we know that there will be another rat race waiting for us from next day.

Returning to the familiar place gives us comfort in our hearts. That is why I get excited when I hear someone speaking American English accent in foreign countries as I have traveled last couple of years. I know what you are thinking, "You don't even speak good American English." Yes, that is true, but I can tell whether it is American English or weird British English. And I am a proud American. Don't you forget it.

For those who have tasted the goodness of God once and walked away from Him, when they return to the Lord, it is a true home coming for them more than anyone else. Like that Prodigal son who didn't realize what he had until he lost everything, then he came to his sense and returned to his loving father.

Tonight we are going to see Israel returning to the Lord once and for all, but until she comes back to the Lord, He is going to make her to drink to the last drop of the bitter consequence of her sin so that she may never go back to the idolatrous life again.

A. RELENTLESS JUDGEMENT ON ISRAEL

Hosea 13:1-3 When Ephraim spoke, trembling, He exalted himself in Israel; But when he offended through Baal worship, he died. 2 Now they sin more and more, And have made for themselves molded images, Idols of their silver, according to their skill; All of it is the work of craftsmen. They say of them, "Let the men who sacrifice kiss the calves!" 3 Therefore they shall be like the morning cloud And like the early dew that passes away, Like chaff blown off from a threshing floor And like smoke from a chimney.

The tribe of Ephraim had gained a prominent position in the northern kingdom Israel and could strike fear into the hearts of the other tribes. When it comes to idol worship, the tribe of Ephraim was the flag ship again.

God never blessed Israel when they worshiped Baal, but that didn't stop them. They kept after their idolatry more and more.

"*The men who sacrifice*" may have the idea of engaging in human sacrifice. In ancient Israel human sacrifice was almost always child-sacrifice.

Idolatry is a total perversion of values. A craftsman's work, the idols were elevated to divine status. The Israelites sacrificed their children to metal object idols and they begged for help from them.

There are many people today who think that to kiss a certain image or to kiss even a certain person is to gain favors from God.

you in the wilderness, In the land of great drought. 6 When they had pasture, they were filled; They were filled and their heart was exalted; Therefore they forgot Me. 7 "So I will be to them like a lion; Like a leopard by the road I will lurk; 8 I will meet them like a bear deprived of her cubs; I will tear open their rib cage, And there I will devour them like a lion. The wild beast shall tear them.

It is a strange and terrible aspect of human nature that when times are good, we often forget the God who blesses us. When times are bad, then we are often more likely to turn our hearts back to God.

At the end of the 20th and the beginning of 21st Century, Americans were in a season of unprecedented prosperity. Yet statistics show that in the 1990 and 2000s churchgoers gave a smallest percentage of their income in contributions since the Great Depression. Sadly, often when we are filled, then we find our hearts exalted, and soon we forget God.

When we neglect God as He blesses us, we then will often face the chastening hand of God. It isn't because God hates us, but because we have demonstrated that we will only turn to Him when times are bad.

B. WHAT IS THIS BAAL?

Baal was the most important deity in the Canaanite pantheon. Baal's followers believed that his blessing guaranteed the continuation of human life and the preservation of social order.

As a fertility deity, they believed that Baal provided children. As the god of the storm, they also believed that Baal brought the rains and made the crops grow. Baal was considered as the king of the divine realm.

But how can we explain the success of Baal worship among the Israelites who witnessed the miracles of God and heard the story of God from their parents and grandparents? The Lord demanded obedience to strict moral and ethical standards as a basis for blessing. In stark contrast, Baal worship appealed to the sensual nature of human. Baal's favor was gained through sympathetic magic in the form of ritual prostitution.

It is happening even within Christianity nowadays. Many Bible teachers and pastors are diluting the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the sake of more people in their churches.

C. GOD, THE ONLY HOPE OF ISRAEL

Hosea 13:9-11 "O Israel, you are destroyed, But your help is from Me. 10 I will be your King; Where is any other, That he may save you in all your cities? And your judges to whom you said, 'Give me a king and princes'? 11 I gave you a king in My anger, And took him away in My wrath.

We often blame God for what happens to us. When we feel like that, this is a good verse to turn to. When we cause problems to ourselves and we are responsible for our conditions. But we can get help from God. He will furnish help to us.

Hosea 13:12-16 "The iniquity of Ephraim is bound up; His sin is stored up. 13 The sorrows of a woman in childbirth shall come upon him. He is an unwise son, For he should not stay long where children are born. 14 "I will

ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. O Death, I will be your plagues! O Grave, I will be your destruction! Pity is hidden from My eyes. 15 Though he is fruitful among his brethren, An east wind shall come; The wind of the Lord shall come up from the wilderness. Then his spring shall become dry, And his fountain shall be dried up. He shall plunder the treasury of every desirable prize. 16 Samaria is held guilty, For she has rebelled against her God. They shall fall by the sword, Their infants shall be dashed in pieces, And their women with child ripped open.

When Israel asked for a king, God gave Saul to them. And the Israelites suffered for their stupidity. God took the last king, Hoshea, away from the northern kingdom Israel and He took Zedekiah away from the southern kingdom Judah in His wrath. Judgment! It was His judgment in the beginning, and His judgment at the end.

Paul quoted the Septuagint translation, Greek version of the OT, of Hosea 13:14 in describing our triumph over death in our sharing in the resurrection of Jesus.

1 Corinthians 15:55 O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?

D. RESTORATION OF ISRAEL BY GOD

Hosea 14:1-3 O Israel, return to the Lord your God, For you have stumbled because of your iniquity; 2 Take words with you, And return to the Lord. Say to Him, "Take away all iniquity; Receive us graciously, For we will offer the sacrifices of our lips. 3 Assyria shall not save us, We will not ride on horses, Nor will we say anymore to the work of our hands, 'You are our gods.' For in You the fatherless finds mercy."

No chapter in the Bible can be more rich in mercy than this last one of Hosea. Throughout the entire Book of Hosea, God tells us how horrible and idolatrous the nation of Israel was. It comes to the point that we feel like we are reading nothing but bad things over and over and there seemed that there was no hope for Israel.

But nobody is without hope in our gracious God. Through His mercy and grace, Israel returned to her sense during her difficult ordeal with Syria.

When I was a kid, I grew up in the environment of Buddhism, Ancestor Worship, Totemism and you-name-it. That was the culture in Korea. Yes, I was an idol-worshiper.

Imagine making something your hands and then falling down and worshiping it. Many men today worship their own ability. They worship themselves and their own achievement. They worship what they are doing and what they are able to do.

In returning to the Lord, Israel must come on God's terms, not their own. The only term of the person with a complete surrender will be accepted by the Lord.

When I was studying the world history as a junior high student, I've learned the meaning of a complete surrender from General Douglas MacArthur. On September 2, 1945, he presided over the Japanese surrender on board the "U.S.S. Missouri," bringing an end to World War II. The term for the Japanese military machine was no resistance, no military, no weapons of any kind in the hands of Japanese people. It was a literal complete surrender at the mercy of the American military power.

In return, the American military under the leadership of General MacArthur helped a devastated Japan rebuild itself, institute a democratic government, and chart a

course that has made it one of the world's leading industrial powers. That was a good example of healing process.

When we return to the Lord, we must first come humbly. We recognize our sin and our total dependence on the grace of God.

When we return to the Lord, we come renouncing our dependence on all other things. We must recognize that the Lord alone can make the difference in our life.

A true healing process only starts from a complete surrender and forgiveness.

Psalm 32:1 Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered.

When God forgives, He forgets. He is not only willing but pleased to use any vessel – just as long as it is clean today.

Isaiah 43:25 I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins.

E. THE HEALING TO THE NATION

Hosea 14:4-7 "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, For My anger has turned away from him. 5 I will be like the dew to Israel; He shall grow like the lily, And lengthen his roots like Lebanon. 6 His branches shall spread; His beauty shall be like an olive tree, And his fragrance like Lebanon. 7 Those who dwell under his shadow shall return; They shall be revived like grain, And grow like a vine. Their scent shall be like the wine of Lebanon.

Even though God said that Israel was bent on backsliding from Him, He promises to heal the backsliding of a repentant Israel. God is too great a physician to allow any patient to leave His office without being healed.

Backsliding is so subtle that the person who is going through may not even realize how far he or she is drifted away from the Lord. Because that person is so busy pampering his or her own carnal desires that they don't even see the danger mark God posted in their hearts.

Are you backsliding? It is never too late to come back to the Lord. Jesus' blood can cleanse any sin, but is powerless to forgive an excuse.

Hosea 14:8 "Ephraim shall say, 'What have I to do anymore with idols?' I have heard and observed him. I am like a green cypress tree; Your fruit is found in Me." 9 Who is wise? Let him understand these things. Who is prudent? Let him know them. For the ways of the Lord are right; The righteous walk in them, But transgressors stumble in them.

I love that v8. When God's people are healed from backsliding, they focus on the Lord Himself and not on any kind of idol.

"Your fruit is found in Me" can have two ideas, equally true.

- 1) We find the fruit to nourish our soul in God, and God alone.
- 2) We find the fruit that we are to bear unto the world in God, and God alone.

F. APPLICATIONS

1) When we return to the Lord, we must first come humbly.

We recognize our sin and our total dependence on the grace of God.

2) When we return to the Lord, we come renouncing our dependence on all other things.

We must recognize that the Lord alone can make the difference in our life.