

# A way back to God

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[ 0 : 00 ] Scriptures to the chapter read in Hosea, the last chapter of the book, chapter 14 and the first four verses. Hosea 14 and the first four verses.

O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God, for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words and turn to the Lord. Say unto him, take away all iniquity and receive us graciously, so will we render the praises of our lips.

Asher shall not save us, we will not ride upon horses, neither will we say any more to the work of our hands, you are our God, for in me the powerless findeth mercy. I will heal their backsliding. I will love them freely, for my anger is turned away from him.

Verses 1 to 4 then of chapter 14 of Hosea. Now throughout this book, written by Hosea, there has been thunder, sometimes low and rumbling away in the distance, sometimes directly overhead. As for example in chapter 9, the whole chapter indicates that the thunder is right overhead. Take verse 7. The days of visitation have come, says the Lord, the days of recompense.

[ 1 : 30 ] Israel shall know it, because your sins are so many, and your hostility is so great. Now you would expect a boat from heaven to destroy such people in their transgression, after such strong words as these, that the boat doesn't come.

And instead the thunder fades away, the sun comes out, and mercy falls like gentle dew from heaven upon the earth beneath the fusing fragrant wrath.

And here in chapter 14, the prophet's message to the transgressing people of God is that there is a way back to God.

Hope is held out here to God's transgressing people. God himself says, I will heal your backsliding, and I will love you freely.

Yes, but notice this most carefully. That the way back to God, for a transgressing people, is not in the vain hope that God would wink at transgression and sin.

[ 2 : 51 ] That God will pretend, pretend that it was ever committed, that it doesn't matter, or that it's not nearly as black as it's painted. The way back for any of us, the way back for any of us, never lies in that direction.

We are never offered hope along that road, any more than Israel was. The road back for any of us, the way back for any of us, never been in that direction. The road back from our iniquity, transgression, and sin, the road back is the way of repentance.

It was so for Israel, it is so for the new Israel, it is so for us all. So our theme here is that of repentance. And we are to think of it, obviously, as it is expressed in the words of our text.

So we notice, first of all then, the call to repentance, which we have here in the first verse. The call to repentance. Well, we read, O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God, for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity.

It's a call to repentance. It's a call to what? It's a call to turn from our sin to God, with grief and hatred of that sin, with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience.

[ 4 : 13 ] Here, Hosea is expressing what repentance is, just as our catechism expresses it. It is, O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God.

And repentance is to turn from our sin unto God, with grief and hatred of that sin. And that's what Hosea is saying here, you have fallen by your iniquity.

Now, let us notice two things here. First of all, let's examine the call. Let's examine this call. And several things can be said about this call to the sinful people of Israel.

And several things ought to be said. And the first is, of course, that the call is divine. Although these words are spoken by Hosea, they are really from God.

Hosea, on this occasion, was God's spokesman, his ambassador, his messenger. And it's only because the call to repent is from God that it can be acted upon at all.

[ 5 : 25 ] It is God who gives repentance to Israel and remission of sins. Genuine repentance is a divinely initiated thing.

It's initiated by God. And there is no genuine return and no genuine repentance. But through God, Jesus said, no man comes to the Father that by me and he is God.

This call is a call from God. And unless God is in it, there is no repentance on our part. It's a divine call.

And we can say too that it's a very gracious and merciful call. It does not come from the prophet through great teeth.

Nor from God as a chilling and unhealing command. Our God is a healing God. Our Savior can be touched with the healing of our infirmity.

[ 6 : 35 ] Our God has sympathy and empathy. And these qualities surely are part of the goodness of God of which we read in Romans chapter 2 and verse 4.

Paul says, do you despise the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering? And don't you know that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?

And here God in his goodness is calling Israel to repentance and calling men and women everywhere to repentance. And there's goodness in that call.

His goodness and mercy is in that call. For his commands are enabling. Return, O Israel, unto the Lord your God.

And this is a call that is also specific. It's specific. We are not only to seek the Lord our God, or to look to the Lord our God, which of course we are to do.

[ 7 : 43 ] But we are told here quite decidedly that we are to return. We are actually to return to the Lord our God. The prodigal in the far country said, I will arise and go to my father.

He didn't say, I must rise up soon after I have thought about it. But he said, no, I will. I will arise and I will go.

And we read, he arose and went. That's repentance. His obedience wasn't in theory.

It was in practice. And so must ours be. We must return. And our return is not one in theory, in our own minds. Just, it's in reality.

We return in repentance to God. Well, that's the call. But the next thing is this, that we examine the reason for the call.

[ 8 : 49 ] And there's an argument put forth here, put forward here, for obedience and for repentance. There's an argument put forward here, and it's in very brief compass, where the prophet says, you have fallen by your iniquity.

Repent, why? Because of your fallenness. And you have fallen by your iniquity.

Because of your fallenness, God is saying to these people, because of your fallenness, you need to repent. And you need to repent of the cause of your fallenness, which is your iniquity.

Your iniquity has been your downfall, is what God is saying to his property. Your sins have been your stumbling blocks. You have fallen.

Return, says God, because of your iniquity. Now this makes the call of God not only one that calls us back to the Lord, but that calls us up from our fallenness.

[ 10 : 03 ] You have fallen. Well, that's where Adam has placed us. We have fallen. But it's also where our own iniquity has placed us.

You have fallen by your iniquity. By your own iniquity, you have fallen. To be sure, we are fallen in Adam. But also we have fallen because of our own iniquity, transgression and sin.

We have been brought down by our own hands. And that is nothing to be proud of. And the call here is very clear. And the argument is very clear.

Return unto the Lord, your God, why? Because you have fallen on account of your iniquity. Now, I think at this point we should notice the particular iniquity or sin that is referred to here in Vest 4.

It is called backsliding. I will heal your backsliding. Backsliding. And backsliding was a constant sin of Israel of old.

[ 11 : 14 ] And it's also a sin of the new Israel. It's the sin of the Christian believer. For backsliding requires something to slide back from.

A ship cannot slip its anchor unless it's first of all anchored. And to backslide is to slip from our anchorage and from our moorings in Christ.

That is a sin. To slip from our moorings. That is not just something unfortunate. That is called in the Bible backsliding. And it's something that needs to be healed because it's a disease. And therefore backsliding is the sin of those who should know better than to let it happen. Now, having said that, we must also say this. That one of the insidious aspects of this sin often is its unknowableness to the person concerned.

[12:27] We may not be aware of what is happening to us when we're backsliding. We may be unaware of it. It's like an illness that comes over us very gradually.

And although others can see something is wrong with us, we're not aware of it ourselves. It's like failing eyesight. It takes a long time for us to realize that our sight is failing.

And we only realize properly when our eyes have been tested. And here, as I said, this sin is a disease because God says, I will heal.

You are backsliding. One writer says that backsliding begins with dusty Bibles and ends with filthy garments. And no wonder A.W. Tosor says, unsaintly saints are the tragedy of Christianity.

Unsaintly saints are the tragedy of Christianity. And so God calls his saints, his people, to abide.

[13:34] To abide in him. And when they do not abide and they become slack in abiding. Then in his mercy and in his goodness he says to his slack in abiding people.

He says to them, O Israel, return unto the Lord your God. For you have fallen by your iniquity. And by your backsliding.

That's the first thing then. The call to repentance. In verse 1. Now the next thing we notice about repentance is the way of repentance.

In verses 2 and 3. The way of repentance. Take with you words. And turn to the Lord. Say to him, take away all iniquity and receive us graciously.

So will we render the calves of our lips. Asher shall not save us. We will not ride upon horses.

Neither will we say any more to the work of our hands. You are our God.

[14:40] For in you the fatherless finds mercy. Now there I believe we have the way of repentance. Take with you words. Take words with you. As you return to the Lord.

Now what a God we have. Not only does he in his goodness and longsuffering and forbearance call us back.

Instead of cutting us off. But he shows us how we can get back. He not only explains why we should return. But he explains how.

And he does so I believe in these two verses 2 and 3. And the first thing he says. The first of two things that we are instructed about here is this. We are to pray.

Take with you words. Take with you words. And turn to the Lord. That surely means we are to speak to the Lord.

[15:42] And we can't use words. We can't take words with us unless we use them and speak to the Lord with them in prayer.

No the point is that we are not told to take bullocks or lambs or incense or anything else with us. Nothing but words.

Nothing in my hand I bring. I just take words to the Lord. Take with you words. No special ceremonies on our part are required.

Nothing. We have nothing to do to try to impress God with the genuineness of our penitence. No works of righteousness which we have done are necessary to commend us to God.

Take with you words. That is pray. Supplicate. Call upon the name of the Lord. Ask. Seek. Knock. Cry out and shout. Thou inhabitant of Zion.

[16:41] For great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of us. That's the first thing then. We are to pray. Take with you words. And the next thing is this.

That there is prayer and prayer. When he says take with you words. It is not verbiage he wants.

That is a multitude of words and words and more words. And especially if the words have no heart or depth. It's not vain repetition he wants.

It's not empty cliches or jargon he wants. Words can be used very easily. They can tip off our tongues very easily. They can be used very cheaply.

But there is no cheap repentance. And therefore knowing the danger of this. God treats us like children as it were.

[17:39] And he puts words in our mouth. In other words. He not only calls us to petition him. But he draws up the petition. Take with you words.

And say. And he gives us the petition. He draws it up for us. And of course. The force of this I think is quite obvious.

That the petition God gives. Is the petition that God will honour. Now of course there is a pitfall we must avoid here.

Of misinterpretation. Regarding these words of instruction and petition. It's this. That it's not by the mere repetition of these actual words.

Paraphrase. That we will find repentance. It's not the bare words themselves. But as Calvin says. [18:44] It's their clear meaning we are to follow. What they say. What these words say. And what God instructs us to say.

Must be the sentiment of our heart. It's not a repetition of the words that God has given us. It's an expression of what is deep down in our hearts.

Let us then look. At what we are taught here. About prayer. So that it's the prayer of repentance. And meaningful. And expresses the deep desire. And need. Of our hearts. And the first thing is this. That there's a strong plea here.

For pardon. We are to say to God. As we return to him. Take away all iniquity. Take away all iniquity. That is remove the stumbling block.

[19:41] Remove that which brought me down. Remove the cause of my downfall. And of my fallenness. We were singing there in Psalm 25.

Pardon mine iniquity. For it is very great. Cast our sins behind your back. Into the sea of your forgetfulness. Put our sins on the head of your scapegoat.

So that they might be taken away into the wilderness. And forgotten forever. Here is the plea of true penitence. And my dear friends.

We can make this plea. Because we have a scapegoat. The Lord Jesus. Who took our sins in his own body on the tree.

And bore our sins up to the tree. That we being dead to sin. Might live unto righteousness. For by his stripes we are evil.

[20:39] Take away all iniquity. And there's no way but through the cross. And through the scapegoat. Through the Lord Jesus himself. And then the next part of our petition is this.

Receive us graciously. We say this to God. When we're returning to him. Receive us graciously. When the ancient iron gate of iniquity.

Has been taken off its hinges. And thrown away. Then the way is wide open for God's reception of us. When the wall of separation has been leveled.

Then the hand of reconciliation. Is extended. And God is reconciled to us. And we're reconciled to God. His hand holds us.

His right hand holds us. And leads us into his favour. And into his fellowship. And this again is what we are to pray. Receive us graciously.

[21:36] And then he says. We will render the calves of our lips. The penitent soul. Who has been pardoned and reconciled.

Has reason to say. As Hosea puts it. We will render the calves of our lips. That is. Not that we will offer the literal calves.

That were offered on the altar of sacrifice. But we will offer the offering that comes from our lips. And what offering comes from our lips?

It's the offering and sacrifice of praise. Whoso offers praise glorifies me. And this is the offering that God wants. Not bulwarks or incense or whatever.

We have the one offering we need in Jesus Christ. What he requires of us as we seek his forgiveness. Is praise and acknowledgement of his mercy.

[22:36] And we are saying to God. Accept the praise I offer. And in verse 3. We have this threefold renunciation.

This threefold renunciation. Asherah. That means Assyria. Assyria shall not save us. We will not ride upon horses. Neither will we say any more to the work of our hands.

You are our God. For in you the fatherless finds mercy. Assyria. Here are the renunciations.

As we return to God. Assyria we renounce. For Assyria will not save us. Horses or chariots will not save us. And the work of our hands.

Our idols will not save us. We will find no pardon or reconciliation. By going to the world to save us. Or by going to the chariots and horses.

[ 23 : 39 ] Of human health and crutches. To save us. Or by going to the idols of our own making. To save us. We renounce these things. In repentance.

We renounce once and for all the world. And our human crutches. And our man made idols. And we renounce them all for God.

For in thee the fatherless finds mercy. Not in Assyria. Not in the horses. Not in the idols. But in God alone. The fatherless finds mercy.

There's mercy there for the helpless. And for the hopeless. And for the homeless. And we renounce in our return to God.

All other refugees. We renounce all other refugees. Because any other refuge is a false refuge. And we find our only refuge in God.

[ 24 : 33 ] For the people. For the people. This then. Is the approach. That the fallen. Meet. For it is the expression. Of true repentance.

We return. Seeking pardon. Reconciliation. And renouncing. All our false things. The way to repent. Take with you words. Not verbiage. But the sentiments that are expressed here. Coming from the depth of our hearts.

And presenting them to God. In prayer. And the last thing is in verse 4. The result of repentance. The result of repentance. If we repent.

Calling on God. For pardon and reconciliation. And renouncing all other refuge. Then we are told. What God's response will be. And we are told.

[ 25 : 34 ] In the very words of God himself. I will heal. Your backsliding. For I will love you. Freely. For my anger is turned away. Now here is.

Grace abounding. To the chief of sinners. Here is God's promised response. To the penitent's plea for pardon. Here is God's sure word of promise.

To the person who has fallen by his illiquity. I will heal. And I will love you freely. Who is a pardoning God like me.

And who has grace. Though rich and free. Notice the first thing then here. I will heal. Their backslide. Now there is majesty in these words.

I. Will heal their backsliding. It's the great physician who is speaking. The one who is never at a loss what to do.

[ 26 : 39 ] Or how to deal with backsliding. It's God alone who can raise the fallen one. Who can raise the fallen.

And lift us from our fallenness. And set us upon a rock. He is Jehovah Rapha. The Lord who heals us. Who forgives all our iniquities.

Who heals. All our diseases. And there is majesty here. I. Will heal you. And there is certainty.

In these words. God says I will. He doesn't say I may. Nor does he say may I. But he says I will.

And God is not a man that he should lie. And God is not unwilling or reluctant. To do what he is able to do. He says I will.

[ 27 : 44 ] And I am willing to save you. To heal you. And if there is majesty. And certainty in these words. There is also grace in these words.

He says I will. Heal you. I will heal you. I may suggest that his grace is extended in two directions. One.

He forgives the sin which backsliding is. And at the same time. He restores the blessing which backsliding forfeits.

That's grace. He deals with the sin itself. And pardons it. And he also deals with the loss that sin brings.

And compensates us for it. For wherever there is sin there is loss. And when we are backsliding. And when we are fallen by our iniquity.

[ 28 : 41 ] We are deeply in the red. But he says I will heal. I will deal with your sin. And I will deal with your loss. And I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten.

So God heals and restores in both directions. So there is majesty. And there is certainty. And there is grace and deity and divinity.

In these words. And then finally he says. I will love them freely. For my anger is turned away from him. Now do you know why God can say that?

Well. Jeremiah tells us. He can say that. To his unfaithful. Backsliding. And adulterous people.

Because as Jeremiah says. I am married to you. That is what God says through Jeremiah. I am married to you. And there is no bill of divorce meant to end that marriage.

[ 29 : 46 ] Even in our backsliding he loves us. And when we repent he shows it by healing us. For his love is the source of his healing.

And the love that he shows us. In bestowing healing upon us. Is a love that is given freely. I will love him freely. Now that is the only way that God can love.

God's love is spontaneous. It is unrestrained. Unrestricted. Un sought. And it is bestowed without any inducements.

That is the beauty of it. It is bestowed without any inducements. Or without any attractiveness in ourselves. And in the long black night.

Of backsliding. He loves us. And having loved his own in the world. He loves them to the end. So what we are saying here I believe is this.

[ 30 : 53 ] That dangerous. As backsliding is. Deserving of divine wrath. As it is. Spiritually withering.

And debilitating as it is. It is not the unpardonable sin. For if. And if we are concerned about our sin. And want it forgiven. Then we know that we can be sure it is not the unpardonable sin. For one of the marks of the unpardonable sin. Is that we couldn't care less about it. And God is saying here. I will heal. I will heal. Your backsliding. Let us not minimize. The spiritual.

Wuthering effect that this sin has upon. The people of God. Let us not minimize. The fallenness. Of our nature. Because of our iniquity.

[ 31 : 54 ] But at the same time. Let us realize. That we have a God. Who is ready to pardon. I will heal. Your backsliding.

But I will love you freely. So God's message here then for us. Today is just this. That we are. To return to him. And we have. We have reason to do this. Every day in life.

We have. We can't. We return to him. Through the gate of repentance. Praying urgently for pardon. Abandoning. Abandoning every false refuge.

And if we do. Then he will not. Abandon us. That will heal us. Restore us. And forgive us. And who then should.

Render to him. The praises of our lips. That those. Who have been healed. Restored. And forgiven. Therefore. Do not despise.

[ 32 : 53 ] The riches. Or the richness. Of God's goodness. And forbearance. And long suffering. And remember.

That the goodness of God. Leads us. To repentance. And this God. In his goodness. Says to us. O Israel.

Return. Unto the Lord. And I will heal you. And I will love you freely. For my anger.

Is turned away. Let us pray. Amen. Lord solemnize us.

We pray thee. In view of these words. And also. Fill our hearts. With encouragement. And strength.

[ 33 : 55 ] As we realize. The significance of them. We are reminded of our need. And reminded too. Of. Not only the ability of God.

But the readiness. And willingness of God. To meet it. And we pray that. O God. That. As thou hast. Commanded us to repent.

And believe the gospel. We believe that. With that command. Thou will give the enabling we need.

Give it to us today. We humbly pray. Give us repentance.

And remission of sins. And remission of sins. So that we will. Render to thee. The calves. The offering. The fruit. The praises of our lips.

And of lives. Submitted. And dedicated. To thee forever. Bless us we pray. Each one in thy presence now.

[ 34 : 55 ] Remember us. Throughout. The rest of this day. May we take time to. Think of the words that. Have been before us this morning. And to marvel afresh.

At the goodness of God to us. In the land of the living. And this we ask for Christ's sake. Amen. Amen.