

‘Return to me, and I will return to you’

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[0 : 00] Amen. Please do keep that passage open in front of you and we'll pray and ask for God's help as we come to his word.! Heavenly Father, we thank you that your word endures forever.

Amen.

Well, the turn of the year, although we're 11 days in, this was planned for last Sunday, okay? It's still close enough to the start of the year to talk about the turn of the year. The turn of the year is commonly a time where people make lots of personal turns or changes in their lives. When I was growing up, I heard lots of people speak about turning over a new leaf. I don't hear that expression so much now, but I used to. Turning over a new leaf, starting afresh. People turn or return to the gym, dust down that old gym membership card that's got to the back of the drawer somewhere. I need to get it back out.

I need to get it working again and work off all that Christmas food and chocolate and all the rest. People turn or return to habits and practices to try and improve well-being, don't they? To take more time outside. Take email off my phones. Start journaling, kind of whatever it is.

Well, as we start Zechariah this evening, we're meeting God's people at a time that they need to turn, a time that they need to return. And actually, where they need to turn to might be a little bit surprising because they're God's people. And so you would think they're already there. You would think, if you'd like, that they're already facing that way, that they're already living life before the face of God. Well, they're not. Verse 3, the Lord of hosts, God says, return to me and I will return to you.

[2 : 30] This is God's people, yet they're not facing the direction. They're not trusting. They're not fully following God. They're facing the other way.

It would be a little bit like reading in the press. What's going on here? Reading in the press tomorrow that, I don't know, someone, some sports star, some footballer, let's say, messy. Oh, he's saying, I've come out and he comes out in the press. I still play for Inter Miami, whoever it is, but I've decided not to go to training anymore. And actually, in the matches, I'm going to wear a different team's shirt. I'm going to wear my own shirt, just my shirt. I'll still play for that team, but actually, I'm going to play by my own rules. I'm going to wear my own strip and do things all a little bit differently. You'd think, really? You're meant to belong to that team, but you want to do things your way? Hang on. Or to use a more common Old Testament picture, as we meet God's people here in Zechariah, they're a little bit more like this. They're a little bit more like a wife who says to her husband, God's people, the bride, you see, to God, the bridegroom, oh, yes, we're married, but I'm not so sure that I love you anymore. Oh, I'm not leaving you, but you don't have all my heart.

It's cooled down. I'm giving some of it to another. And so, God, in verse 3, calls them to return, to repent, to do a 180, and to come back to him. And so, that brings us to our first point this evening.

Just two points as we walk through these first opening verses of Zechariah. Our first point, God calls us to turn from sin to him. Verse 3 again, therefore, say to them, so this is God coming to Zechariah the prophet, therefore, say to them, thus declares the Lord of hosts, return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. And suppose the question is then, well, what are they doing? How have they turned away from God? Well, it doesn't actually list out the specifics here in these six verses, but what we're going to see a little bit later on in this book of Zechariah is in chapters 5, 10, 13, we'll see there's idolatry. They're worshiping false gods. There's religious hypocrisy. To use a phrase that we used in Malachi, if you were here for that series, just the book that follows this, there's lip service religion. Oh, they're sort of there, but not fully, not wholeheartedly. So, there's idolatry. We'll also see in chapter 7, there's social injustice. They're forgetting the poor and needy amongst them. Some are coming to church, if you like, with full stomachs, with full fridges, and ignoring those who haven't eaten in a month, ignoring the widow, the fatherless. Now, these are some of the sins, the evils that are in the land, that are amongst God's people as they're in the land here. These are the evils they need to turn and repent of. But interestingly, God doesn't list them out here. He doesn't list them right at the start, does he? What does he do? Well, God, through Zechariah, wants to point kind of to the principle that sort of lies underneath the specific sin issues. What is really going on, however these presenting issues are? Well, these people are ignoring God's word. They're ignoring

God's word. But now to show them that, for God to show them that, he draws the people's attention to their fathers. Verse 2, the Lord was very angry with your fathers. Therefore, say to them, thus declares the Lord of hosts, return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets cried out. Thus, says the Lord of hosts, return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds. But they did not hear or pay attention to me, declares the Lord. And so that's how Zechariah, God, through Zechariah, begins to kind of work out this principle of wanting to bring them back to his word. So let's try and understand a bit of who their fathers were and who they are to kind of work our way there. So who are their fathers?

[6 : 51]

Well, to work out who their fathers are, we need to know who they are. So verse 1, in the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Ido. So who are they? Who is it that Zechariah is speaking to and writing to? Who are they? When are they living? Well, in the second year of Darius. That is, they're living among the first wave of exiles to return to the land after being 70 years out of the land in Babylon and Persia. They're the first to come back to the promised lands after the exile. So now, if you've been with us just at the end of last year as we were doing Nehemiah, let's try and place ourselves in the timeline of the Bible in relation to that. And what you need to do then is, from where we were in Nehemiah, is kind of wind the clock back by about 70 years. We're around 70 years before Nehemiah came and did all that work on the wall. When I was growing up, you could still kind of, all these references, I do feel I am old now, but when I was growing up and you had videos and VCRs, and if you don't know what that is, you can come and speak to me at the end, and you rewind, you could still watch the tape rewind, and you kind of saw everything going backwards, okay? So that's what we need to do in our heads. When we left Nehemiah last year, the walls of Jerusalem were built, and the temple was built, and what you need to do now is kind of bit by brick, kind of rewind all of that building and all of that construction, because they're 70 years before that. The walls aren't up yet, and the temple's not been finished either. In Ezra chapter 6, we learn the temple is finished in the sixth year of Darius, and so we're a few years before that, in the second year.

And so what's the short version of all of that? Well, here's God's people back in the land, 70 years after exile, about 500 years or so, 520 years before the birth of the Lord Jesus.

And here's Zechariah speaking to them, but at the same time, Haggai is speaking to them, he's a contemporary, and Ezra's all there, and they're ministering amongst the first returnees to the land. Right, so the kind of MTA, ministry training academy, you turn up to one of their days, and who is it that's on the teaching team, or you enlist in the MTA equivalent back then?

Well, who are the teachers? It's Haggai, it's Zechariah, and Ezra the priest is there too as well, okay, that's the kind of the world of God's people here. So that's Zechariah, and that's the people at this time. So who are their fathers that God is speaking to? Who are their ancestors that didn't listen? Well, that's the exile generation. It is the exile generation that sinned, and verse 4, did not listen, did not listen to who? The former prophets, they did not listen to Isaiah, they did not listen to Jeremiah, they didn't listen to Ezekiel, all those prophets. No, when they spoke to the fathers, what did their ancestors do? They put on noise-canceling headphones. They put on noise-canceling headphones over their ears, and did not listen to God's word, did not listen to the prophets sent by God to speak to them. They didn't take seriously God calling them to turn from their sin and telling them that judgment was coming. No, that generation, they thought, well, yes, we're in a covenant relationship with God, but we can kind of do as we please. Ignore his prophets, not really pay attention in church, turn to other gods, and God, well, is he really going to care? Again, to pick up the language of Hosea and other places in the Old Testament, God's people were the bride that became a harlot, having affair after affair, thinking the marriage would continue unaffected. But with hard hearts, hearts had turned away from God, turned away from his word, and judgment came. Jerusalem fell, and God's people were taken into exile. So, dear friends, if you find yourself this evening wallowing, enjoying, delighting in, playing with sin, and at the start of this new year, thinking God surely will ignore it, it won't bother him, dear friends, be reminded sin has consequences. Yes, these people's fathers, God came and warned them of their sin. God does not turn a blind eye to sin.

Our closeness to and relationship with God, if we know him, will be strained if we keep swimming and enjoying sin and turning from God. Cold. Sin is always going to be bringing cold snow on your walk with the Lord, stifling your sanctification, putting distance between you and God.

[12:02] Or indeed, and maybe this is closer to what was happening in the hearts of the ancestors, the fathers of Zechariah, those who went before, if you're thinking, because I belong to God, and I'm in covenant relationship with him through the Lord Jesus, there surely will be never anything I have to repent of. Well, know that that's wrong too. Half-heartedness, wandering from the truth, hardening our hearts, we're all prone to it, even as we've come to know the Lord Jesus.

Even though we belong to God through Christ, doesn't mean we have to stop asking for forgiveness. When parts of the old self and the old flesh continue to flare up, repentance turning to Jesus is how we enter his kingdom, but it's also how we live in his kingdom.

The Lord Jesus there, right at the start of his ministry, there in Mark chapter 1, what does he say? The time has come. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel. Kingdom living and repentance go together. But think of a child in a family. When dad finds sin in their child, yes, they belong to them absolutely, but they lovingly correct them, show them what family life is like.

Here's how we live in this family. Children should expect that. And so it is with us. We need to daily come to our heavenly Father and pray, as Jesus taught us, forgive us our sins, to turn from sin.

But repentance, turning, returning, isn't just turning from something. No, they were to turn from evil ways, but it's also turning to something, or more specifically, to someone. It's turning towards God. So how does God, at the start of Zechariah's prophecy, draw the people back to himself? What does he show them? How does he motivate them? By the enduring nature of his word, to show them that they're to listen to his word. And so he goes on and asks these kind of three rhetorical questions, that they would come to God and come to his word and listen to it. Three rhetorical questions to show them that his word will endure and that they're to cling to it, to turn from evil and to take seriously God's word.

[14:23] Verse 5, he says, your fathers, where are they? Well, they're dead. Judgment, right? They were taken out of the land. They don't last. The second question, and the prophets, do they live forever?

No, they don't even endure. But then God goes on, but my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants, the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers? Answer, yes, they outlasted them. Your fathers, that generation, gone. The prophets, they too have died. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel.

But my words, which I gave to them, my word, says God, they endure on. They endure on. I wonder if anyone has ever said words to you that have kind of endured or stayed with you.

Maybe when you were dropped off at university. Maybe the kind of morning you were married or moved into your first house or first job. I still remember words that were spoken to me my first day of teaching up in Cruden Bay a long time ago. And there was a teacher there who gave words to me that day, just a kind of offhand sentence, a little comment that to this day I can still remember.

Words that helped me so much as I started out in that career for a while. Words that helped me improve true every day. They sort of endured. Well, to an infinitely greater degree, God's word endures forever. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. And this is to help motivate God's people and to call them to repent and to come to himself. And I think it's to do that in two ways. Firstly, it should remind them of the seriousness of God's word about sin and judgment.

[16:19] I called your fathers on their sin and I will call you on your sin too. Incidentally, I think that's why God refers to himself, here is the Lord of hosts. Did you see that as we went through? The Lord of hosts, the Lord of hosts, that is God Almighty or the Lord of armies. God is reminding them that he is not to be mocked. God's calling them to turn from sin is a serious call. It's the most serious call in all the world. Ignoring sin, leaving it undelivered, not taking God's word on sin and judgment seriously is more dangerous than playing with fire. His rule and reign are universal. His kingdom knows no end. We're to listen to him. But it should also hearten them. His enduring word means he can be trusted to be their God and to show them grace and mercy. You see, part of what caused the half-heartedness amongst the first wave of returnees from exile and the exiles came back in different groups at different stages, but part of what caused this half-heartedness was just apparent disappointment with their circumstances.

We learn from Haggai that the people are impoverished, they're poor, and some of their fellow Jews who'd maybe stayed back in Babylon in exile, they were maybe actually doing quite well. And along with being poor, well, there's no king on the throne in Judah. The fact that the date in chapter 1, verse 1, is marked by Darius's reign and not a king of Judah or Israel is so striking. God had promised a king to reign forever, one to sit on David's throne forever. Where is he? We're not even marking the date by him. He's not yet come.

Will he ever come? Can we trust God for his king to come? And actually, we're going to see as we go through Zechariah, a huge part of what Zechariah is going to go on and say and prophesy through visions and kind of apocalyptic messages is that, yes, the king in David's line is coming. God does keep his word.

His word does endure. Enemies will be defeated. Zion will prosper. The king is coming. God's kingdom will come. Friends, isn't it true in life that circumstances can often come into our life that just leave us feeling very disappointed? I thought 2025 was going to be the year of years of whatever it was going to be.

I thought this was going to happen. The year I get promoted, start my own business, get married, reconcile a friendship, go on holiday, beat my illness, see my spouse converted, see my children converted, see my friends, my parents come to the Lord, whatever it is. And these things didn't happen.

[19:28] Our goals, our dreams, our desires aren't met and some of them very, very good and godly things. And when they're not met, we can be sent into kind of spiritual kind of spiral or even just a spiritual malaise. God, are you really listening? Do you really care? Can you really keep your word? And perhaps we just start to withdraw. You see, the other thing we're going to learn about these exiles is they've kind of given up on rebuilding the temple. Remember, Jerusalem and the temple is destroyed.

They've come back to the land and under Ezra, they're to begin that work of rebuilding the temple, but it's not happening. And for them to give up on rebuilding the temple is to kind of give up on worshipping God. Dear friends, at the start of this year, let the knowledge of God's enduring word and promises send you to him. Whatever circumstances, disappointments, whatever's happened in the last day, month, year, decade, 50 years, whatever it is, go back to him, back to his arms, go back to the Lord Jesus. His word endures forever. Not one promise, not one word of his will ever, ever fail.

And let all these things send you back, not just to Christian things, but to Christ himself. You see, these exiles had returned to the land. They'd done something other exiles hadn't done and probably thought or began to think, maybe that's enough. God had promised us this land, we've come back to it. Surely everything should come together now. Doesn't that make us a little bit better than those who stayed behind? Surely everything should be coming together.

Well, no. Spiritually, these people had come to the place of religious life, but without coming to the person to whom it all pointed. In other words, the exiles that we're going to, the returnees, rather, that we're going to meet over the next coming weeks, they'd done what? They'd walked the long road to God's city, yet they'd stopped short of God himself. They'd walked the long road to God's city, yet stopped short of God himself. And so hadn't turned from sin and to God. And so when God calls us to turn from sin to him, to return to him, it's not enough to merely go to the places where God is worshipped and served, i.e. to come to church or a life group or whatever, we must come to worship and serve God from the heart. Dear friends, God wants our hearts, all of them. So let me ask you, have you turned or returned to church this last year, but not come to God himself? Are you present in the building this evening, but know that your heart and your life isn't given over to God? Dear friends, come to him, come to him, turn to him, return to him. Don't let circumstances turn you away. Don't let life make you half-hearted, for he alone will satisfy and give you life in all its fullness.

And so that brings us to our second point. Firstly, God calls us and calls his people to turn from sin to him. And secondly, God will always receive those who turn to him. God will always receive, always welcome all who turn to him. Verse 3 again, return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you. That doesn't make repentance some kind of work or anything. No, it's just God's way of saying, cry to me and I'll hear you. I'll receive you. I'm so full of grace that when you've sinned, when you've grown half-hearted, when you've almost given up, come to me and here I am waiting.

[23 : 29] We see in verse 6, don't we, that some people have repented, and it's likely that some people in Zechariah's day sort of have repented and God has dealt with them accordingly. That is, he's shown them grace. And so, dear friends, know that God always, always welcomes those who turn to him. And that, of course, was so clearly seen in our first reading, wasn't it, from Luke 15, that the prodigal son, the son has sinned big time. He's shunned the father. He's hard-hearted.

He's run away. He wanted his dad dead. It's all going so wrong, but he turns. He returns. And where is the father? Looking for him. Looking for him. Didn't that strike you afresh as Joe was reading it earlier? There the father is, arms out, waiting for him, heart full of compassion, welcomes him home, gives him the best, celebrates him in such a way that makes kind of Christmas dinner look meager. It is come and feast and rejoice without end. So, dear friend, if you have never come to God, he will celebrate like that when you come to him. You cannot be too evil. You cannot be too far gone or far off. The Lord Jesus has come so that you could come to the father. Come to him.

Turn to God. Receive all the blessings of life in him. Come to Jesus and live. But dear friend, if you've backslid in, if you've been like the prodigal son who's run off, if you've fallen into a spiritual pit of mud and mire, then take the warning and the good news of this passage. The warning is that God judges sin. His word endures now as it does then. Sin will not bring blessing. To take off the spiritual ear defenders and come to God himself through Jesus and know the blessing of coming to him. And know that that needs to be today. Do not keep hardening your hearts. Come to him today. You see, even in Zechariah's day, some people did harden their hearts to Zechariah's message. The Lord Jesus tells us in Matthew 23 that Zechariah was murdered.

From Abel to Zechariah, righteous blood was shed by those who should have been listening to God, but didn't. Those who had God's word open to them, but didn't repent, didn't return. So dear friends, if you have backslidden, if you're wallowing in the mire of muck and sin, turn today. Don't delay.

Don't let your heart be hardened. But if you have backslidden, the good, the glorious news is that your heavenly father is waiting with his arms open. Waiting with his arms open, delighting to take you home. So turn from pride. Turn from self-pity. Turn from sin and come to your heavenly father who's waiting to receive you. Come to him. Return to him and he will return to you. So dear friends, may 2026 be a year of turning for us all. Maybe there does need to be a turn to exercise or journaling or whatever it is, but for all of us, may it be a year marked by turning again and again. Indeed, may our lives, may our lives be marked by turning again and again to the gracious arms of God daily, heartfelt, sincere repentance. Turn and feel the warmth of his face. Return to him and he will return to you. Let's pray.

[27 : 24] Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the grace and mercy you have shown us in the Lord Jesus, that you are a God who calls and welcomes sinners to repent, to turn, to come to you.

And so may we be a people who do that, who delight to come to you knowing that we will receive grace and mercy and love. Lord, I pray that for all of us, we would delight each and every day to wake up, to start the day and all through the day and to end the day facing the Lord Jesus, turning towards him, not towards evil, but towards the Lord Jesus, knowing his love and his grace and his goodness.

And I pray that that's how we would live all the days of our life. And we ask it in his name. Amen.