

4. Back to God
God Will Come Back
Psalm 130

During this Lenten season, we've been talking about turning back to God. "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love." That's the line from "Come, Thou Fount," which has been our theme song during Lent.

By the way, someone was asking me what the phrase, "Here I raise mine Ebenezer" means. To be honest, as many times as I have sung that song over the years, I had never looked in it. So, this week I did. It's a reference to 1 Samuel 7:12. The Israelites had strayed far from God and brought great heartache and difficulty on themselves. Then God raised Samuel up as a judge over the people. Samuel placed a large stone between Mizpah and Jeshanah. He called the stone "Ebenezer," which means, "the stone of help." With that stone Samuel was saying, "This is a new day. Today we turn back to God." When the people would see the Ebenezer stone, they would be reminded that they were no longer the people who had strayed from God. They were now the people who walked with God. The Ebenezer stone was the visual reminder that the people who had turned their backs on God had now turned back to God, who had been faithful to them when they were unfaithful.

God had waited on Israel to return. And sometimes we have to wait on God to return to us. "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!" Loosely translated that means, "Lord, I'm hurting, and I'm not even sure you are listening to me."

Haven't you ever found yourself saying, "God, are you there? Why have you left me? Are you ever coming back?"

But many of you are probably thinking, "Wait a minute. What do you mean we have to wait for God to return to us? Haven't you been telling us that God never leaves us?"

That's true. God doesn't leave us. We know God is there. We know it by faith. God has promised to remain with us.

"Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or wither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: If I make my bed in hell, behold thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me." Psalm 139:7-9

We know that God is always with us. We know that God never turns God's back on us.

But knowing and feeling are two different things. There are times when it sure feels like God's back is turned to us. There are times when God seems far away and we are left alone to deal with life on our own.

As Christ was dying on the cross, he felt abandoned by God. He cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Had God forsaken him? Some say, "Yes, Jesus took our sins on himself, and when Christ became sin, God had to turn his back on him." That's not the way I understand what happened. I believe that God was right there, suffering with Christ, sharing his pain. But Christ's agony was so intense that it

overrode his awareness of his Father's presence and love. For an eternally long moment, Christ could no longer feel God's presence. In that moment, he experienced what humanity has had to contend with since the fall of Adam. Since Adam and Eve sinned, humanity has been hiding from God and saying, "O God, where are you? Why have you left me? When are you coming back?" The human race has been calling to God out of the depths of our sin and guilt. We have off from God, who is the source of life and joy and peace. We have been spiritually dead, which is the real death. In that moment Christ experienced spiritual death.

It lasted only a moment. By the time of his death, he had reconnected with God. His last words were, "Into thy hand I commend my spirit."

If that could happen to Christ, it can happen to us. And it does. There are times when we feel cut off from God.

Sometimes it's when we are going through an especially difficult time. But not usually. What I have seen, both in my own life and in others, is that when we are going through great trials, we often feel God's presence most powerfully. When we need God to survive, God gives us a special grace. We experience an outpouring of the awareness of God's presence and spirit.

No, it's more likely that we feel that God has abandoned us when we have neglected the care of our souls. It's when we get so caught up in the cares and pleasures of life that we forget to nurture our spiritual lives.

I was talking with the pastor over in Brazoria a couple of days ago. We hadn't talked in several weeks, so we spent some time catching up. He asked me how my life was going, and I reported that I had had another grandbaby since we last talked. I asked him how his life was going, and he said, "Well, not too well. Lightning struck the transformer to our house and destroyed all our electronic appliances." I asked him what effect that had on him and his family. He said, "It done wonders for my prayer life." He said, "We had intended to cut back on our television watching for Lent. Evidently God has something more in mind."

I wonder how many of us would experience a sudden surge in spiritual health, an increased prayer life, if all our electronic gadgets were to be destroyed suddenly. Is it any wonder that we don't hear the still small voice of God? It's being drowned out by nonstop television and radios and cell phones and i-pods. We are so busy being entertained that we are neglecting our souls, and we wonder why God seems so far away. We are too full of the pleasures of modern living.

And, at the same time we are ground down by the cares of living. It happens. It happens a lot.

A picture that has stayed with me since I was a child is an act that I saw on the Ed Sullivan Show. This man had about forty sticks that stood up in rows. And he had a pile of plates. He started out by putting one of those plates on top of a stick and spinning it. Then he left the plate spinning and put another plate on another stick and got it to spinning. Then another plate. Soon, he had ten or twelve plates spinning. Then, the audience would notice that the first plate had started wobbling. The man didn't notice it until it had almost fallen. Then he saw it, and he made a mad dash back to it and got it spinning again. Then he would start another plate spinning, and two more plates would start wobbling. By the end of the act, he had all of the plates spinning, but there were

always two or three about to fall. And he ran around like a crazy man keeping all the plates spinning.

I've kept that picture in my head, because that's my life. I've got all these plates spinning in my life, and there are always two or three that are wobbling and about to crash to the ground if I don't take care of them immediately.

When is there time to take care of our souls? We don't. And they shrivel up. The spiritual senses that make us aware of spiritual realities are deep within our souls. So, when our souls are weary, our spiritual sensibilities are diminished. God seems far away. The reality is that God is with us. It's just that our spiritual eyes have grown dim from weariness. We experience long stretches of daily drudgery, interrupted by moments of sheer panic. When we are just weary and our souls have become numb, that's when God seems far from us.

What's the answer? At the end of the act, the man simply went around grabbing the dishes and putting them back on the stack. After all the dishes were safely stacked, he enjoyed a well-deserved rest.

"I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope."

When God seems far from us, it is time to grab the dishes and put them back on the stack. Now, I know it's not as simply as that. There are some things that must be done. You don't stop feeding your children. You don't walk away from the job. But we do need take a long, hard look at all the plates that are spinning in our lives and ask whether they really need to be spinning.

My first church out of seminary had a membership of about 200. I habitually worked 70 or 80 hours a week there. I was worn to a frazzle. And it was nobody's fault but mine. There wasn't 70 to 80 hours a week of work to do there. I could have easily done the things that really needed to be done in 30 hours. Nobody made me work that hard. I did it to myself. Many of the members probably wished that I hadn't visited them as much as I did. They were too polite to say it, but they were probably thinking, "Would you give us a break and just leave us alone for awhile?" I had to learn to pick up some of those spinning plates, gently stack them away, and wait upon the Lord. I had to learn that I am a better preacher and pastor, when I am not spiritually exhausted, when my connection with God is strong.

Lent is a time to reconnect with God. We need to nurture our souls. We need to rediscover the means of grace. We need to set aside time for prayer, for Bible study, for reflection. However you connect with God, you need to take time to do it. It's time to wait for the Lord.

God has not turned away from us. It just feels like it. When we wait quietly upon the Lord, pushing back the demands of the world and allow our souls to be refreshed, we will find that God has been there all along. It's just that the clutter in our lives had blocked our vision of God.

When we take time to wait upon the Lord, we will see God standing before us with arms wide open to take us in a strong, warm, healing, loving embrace. God will be back in our lives. And we will be alive once again.

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