

3. Back to God  
Don't Turn Your Back on God  
Psalm 95

My daddy had a saying, "No man is a total failure. He can always be used as a bad example." The generation of Hebrews who were led out of Egypt would be considered a total failure if they weren't such a good bad example.

They received more miracles than any generation before or since. God brought the mighty Egyptian empire to its knees in order to deliver them. They were led through the midst of the sea by God. God fed them manna in the wilderness. God gave them water from a rock in the desert. God led them as a cloud by day and as a pillar of fire by night. God spoke to them from Mt. Sinai.

If there was ever a generation whose devotion to God should have been won by mighty acts of power, it was this generation. Yet they turned their backs on God every chance they could.

They were constantly complaining and questioning and doubting. If God said to go left, they wanted to go right. If God said to obey a commandment, they would disobey as quickly as they could. If there were no false gods around to worship, they created one. In spite of the fact that time and again, God miraculously provided water for them, they panicked every time their supply of water ran out. They wanted to go back to Egypt. They preferred slavery and abuse to walking with God.

As a result, they never entered the Promised Land. They spent their lives wandering around in the desert, sure that at any moment they would die. Eventually they were right.

They were like the hypochondriac who put in his will these words: "I told you I was sick." Eventually he was right.

They did eventually all die in the wilderness. But, worse than that, the life they had while they were still living was pretty miserable.

It didn't have to be. They could have celebrated victory after victory with God. They could have celebrated all those wonderful manifestations of God's love for them. They could have looked forward with great wonder and curiosity to see what else the Lord would be doing for them.

Instead, they decided to turn their backs on God.

And it was a decision. They decided not to enjoy God's power and love. It did not matter what God did for them, they were determined not to be grateful or to return God's love.

Why? Because they wanted to be in control. They wanted to be the ones to decide where they would go and what they would do. It was all right for God to perform miracles for them, as long as they were the miracles they wanted at the times and in the places they wanted them.

And the Psalmist says to us, "Don't be like that generation."

Why would the Psalmist have to say that? Because many of us have to fight the same battle they fought and lost. There is a part of us that wants to be in control.

We want to be able to say, “Tomorrow I will have a good life. I will be healthy and strong, because I am making good decisions today. I will have food and water, clothing and shelter, because I am doing the right things today. I will live a long, prosperous life, because I am living wisely. I will live and have a good life, because I have decided to live and have a good life.”

Like all deceptions, this one is powerful because it has some truth to it. If we live wisely, we can increase the odds that we will have healthy, prosperous lives, at least for a time.

People who smoke, drink, misuse drugs, are promiscuous, hang around with violent people, drive recklessly and don't sue their seatbelts, don't eat right, don't exercise, don't take their vitamins, don't get an education, and don't hold a job are somewhat less likely to live healthy, prosperous lives than those who do.

However, it doesn't take us long to name people who have broken all the rules and lived healthy, prosperous lives. One time I was going into a nursing home to visit a member. There were two residents of the nursing standing outside the entrance. They were taking a cigarette break. I had to bite my tongue to keep from saying, “If you ladies don't stop smoking, you will probably die at a young age.” I've known many smokers who did die young. I've known a few who lived long lives.

On the other hand, who can forget Jim Fixx? Jim Fixx weighed 240 pounds and smoked two packs of cigarettes until the age of 35. Then, he started running. He lost 60 pounds and stopped smoking. Jim Fixx was one of the first and greatest proponents of the virtues of running. He wrote books and toured the United States teaching that the secret to a long, healthy life is to run daily. When he was 52, he went out and made his daily run and came home and died of a heart attack.

He was right. Running and other aerobic exercises do increase your chances of having a long, healthy life. But they don't guarantee it.

We can do all the right things. But the truth is that, ultimately, we are not in control of our lives. How many of you were born because you decided you wanted to be born? None of us brought ourselves into this world. None of us has as much control over the day to day events of our lives as we think we do. Is there a day that goes by when something totally unexpected doesn't happen in your life? Usually they are small things that don't have much impact on us. But sometimes something happens which moves our lives in a totally different direction than we ever imagined it would go. And, of course, when we die, we completely lose control of our lives. There is nothing we can do to extend our lives indefinitely. Our only hope for life beyond death lies in the hands of God.

From beginning to end, ultimately, God is in control of our lives.

When we understand that, we have two choices: We can resent God's control of our lives and turn our backs on God, as that generation of Hebrews did. Or, we can be grateful that our lives are in the hands of a good and loving God, who gave us the gift of life, who sustains our lives daily and who wants to give us eternal life, if we will just entrust ourselves to God's eternal care.

There is only one way we can lose eternal life—that is to turn our backs on God, who is the source of life.

The good news that Jesus came to bring us is that it is never too late to change our minds. Even when we turn our backs on God, God never turns away from us.

Again, remember that generation of Hebrews in the desert. Even though they turned their backs on God again and again, God never turned God's back on them. God continued to feed them and shelter them all the days of their lives. God never turned away from them.

Not to say God wasn't tempted to. One time God called Moses in and said, "I'm tired of the stubbornness of these people. I think I will just start a new people from your descendants and forget about these Hebrews." But Moses talked him out of it. Not that God really ever intended to do that. God was just letting off steam.

Haven't you ever done that? I sure have. I can't tell you how many times I've quit the ministry over these past 36 years. Several times on Sunday afternoon after a particularly ineffective sermon, I've quit. After some contentious board meetings, I've quit. When I have come away from a pastoral visit, knowing that I wasn't able to lift the person out of the pain he or she was in, I've quit. Probably a hundred times I have walked into the bishop's office and turned in my ordination papers and my license to preach, and walked out to go live on a desert island, where I had no responsibilities, no demands, and no failures. But after a time of prayer and a good night's sleep, I always change my mind. I was just letting off steam. I will never turn my back on God's calling for my life.

God was just letting off steam. God does get frustrated with us. But God never gives up on us. That's how good our God is.

Our lives are in God's hands. Don't resent it. If you have turned your back on God, turn back to God by joyfully celebrating that your life is in the hands of a good and loving God.

Dr. Wesley Welborn, Senior Pastor  
Chapelwood UMC