

THROUGH NIGHT TO MORNING

by

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SERMON EIGHT -

HOPE FOR BACKSLIDERS

"I will heal their backsliding" (Hosea 14:4).

THE Book of Hosea is GOD's message to the backslider. Follow the name of Ephraim through the book, and you will see the experience of an impenitent backslider. He is

1. GOD-FORSAKEN. **"Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone"** (Hosea 4:17). What can GOD do for a man who will not confess and forsake his sin, except just let him alone? And to be let alone of GOD, while sin works in us its direful results, is a pitiable state.

2. DESOLATE. **"Ephraim shall be desolate in the day of rebuke"** (chap. 5:9). Without GOD the backslider's condition becomes desolate indeed, and loving rebuke, which he resents, increases the desolation.

3. OPPRESSED. **"Ephraim is oppressed and broken in judgment"** (chap. 5:11). Desolation becomes oppression. Emptiness becomes burden. The judgments of GOD, if they lead to repentance, will bless us, but if we resent them, they will break us. When we violate law, physical or moral, we do not break the law so much as it breaks us.

4. FALSE. **"They commit falsehood"** (chap. 7:1). **"Ephraim compasseth me about with lies"** (11:12). The backslider's life is apt to be a living lie. He tries to appear happy, when he is really miserable. He poses for a good man, when he knows he is bad. Hypocrisy becomes a habit with him.

5. INCONSISTENT. **"Ephraim is a cake not turned"** (chap. 7:8). He is overdone on one side and underdone on the other. On the side of formal ritualistic observance he is apt to be overdone; on the side of genuine, solid, Christian living he is underdone. The backslider often tries to make up for his lack of piety by excess of religious form. His songs and responses on Sunday may be loud, while his living during the week is low. He **"is a cake not turned,"** burnt on one side and raw on the other.

6. FOOLISH AND COWARDLY. **"Ephraim also is like a silly dove without heart"** (chap. 7:11). The dove is a symbol of gentleness, and the backslider, though he may be gentle, is certain to be silly. He will talk and act foolishly. The language of Zion on his lips sounds silly; it lacks the ring of reality. His prayers are without heart, and when he is asked to do something for CHRIST, he is too cowardly to undertake it.

7. SELFISH. "[Ephraim] is an empty vine; he bringeth forth fruit unto himself" (chap. 10:1). Like the vine that bears no clusters of grapes for others, but keeps all its life of root and branch simply to add to its own length and leaf, the backslider holds his own, and builds up only himself. He seeks his own profit and pleasure. He uses his money in advancing his own interest. He begins to talk against foreign missions, because he cannot see the good of sending men and money to the heathen while there is so much need at home. He is afraid that somebody will get something out of him. He hates collections, because they bring nothing to him, but are an attempt to gather fruit from the empty vine of his stingy soul. Not what can I give, but what can I get? is the question he asks of everything he sees. He begins to be a Dead Sea taking in a Jordan of blessing and holding it without an outlet. The result is emptiness, for not a living thing thrives in the waters of his selfish life.

8. UNSATISFIED. "Ephraim feedeth on wind, and followeth after the east wind" (chap. 12:1). The backslider misuses the gifts of GOD. Wind is good as breath, but bad as food. If he would breathe it, he would be invigorated, but his eating fills him with emptiness and distress. So the gifts of GOD received gratefully and used rightly will bless and satisfy us, but received without gratitude and used only upon self, they do not satisfy the soul. And the backslider turns from the solid food of GOD's Word to the wind of light literature; from the satisfying manna of truth to the east wind of fiction.

He ceases to relish the table of the Lord, spread Sunday after Sunday in the sanctuary, while he feeds upon the wind of the theatre during the week. He neglects the strengthening meat of GOD's service, and runs after the east wind of the dance and the card party. If he is not poisoned by the malaria in it, he soon becomes a weak, emaciated invalid, because his soul has been starved by the lack of nourishment. He is a spiritual suicide.

9. VAINGLORIOUS. "When Ephraim spake trembling, he exalted himself" (chap. 13:1). The backslider has lost the steady accent of faith. His voice trembles with fear. He begins to doubt everything and everybody. The sound of the wind upon which he feeds frightens him. He is restless at church, at the theatre and dance. He fits nowhere. But he must brace up and assert himself. He becomes self-conscious, and soon swells with vanity. He magnifies the self-element in religion. His motto is "that if a man does not esteem himself very highly, no one else will esteem him."

The trembling doubter has developed into a boastful Pharisee. He quits praying, for "Why should a man of so much importance be all the time begging GOD to help him? GOD helps those who help themselves." The inflation of self has at last well nigh excluded GOD from his life. The knowledge that puffs up has banished the love that builds up. He has become a walking, talking capital I.

For such a backslider there is no hope, so long as he is impenitent, but hope dawns the moment he returns to GOD, and confesses his sin. "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" (14:1-2). After such a full confession, without excuse or palliation, GOD begins to deal with His penitent child in the most gracious and tender manner:

1. HE HEALS. "**I will heal their backsliding**" (chap. 14:4). There are two kinds of healing. One has to do with wounds, the other with disease. Some soldiers on campaign need the healing of wounds; others of disease; and still others, sick and wounded, need both kinds of healing. Sin treats some as the robbers on the way from Jerusalem to Jericho treated the traveller. It cuts and bruises, leaving them half dead. They are surprised, overtaken in a fault. Almost before they know it they were attacked and hurt. They need the treatment of the good Samaritan, who took the wounded man in hand and cared for him until his wounds were healed. With other backsliders sin is a deep-seated disease, and needs constitutional treatment.

Blessed fact it is that JESUS CHRIST is surgeon for the wounded, and physician for the diseased. His blood is equally good for wound and disease. We need not stop to discuss the different methods of treatment. The fact that healing is possible is the thing which interests us now, and we can safely leave the methods to the physician into whose hands we have placed our case.

2. HE LOVES. "**I will love them freely.**" The word "**freely**" means that He loves of Himself, not because He sees traits of character that call forth His love, but just because He cannot help it. It is His nature. The backslider is apt to be discouraged by the thought that GOD does not love him, because by his sins he has made himself so unlovely.

It is true that a backslider is an unlovely character, but, take heart, GOD does not love you because you are lovely, but because He is loving. The spring of love is not in you, but in Himself. He is a fountain of love, and fountains, you know, do not have to be induced to flow. The water is sent forth by an inner force. When the water must be drawn, it has ceased to be a fountain. Backsliding brother, bring the empty vessel of your penitent soul beneath the overflowing fountain of GOD's infinite love, and be filled with His fulness.

3. HE DRAWS NEAR. "**I will be as the dew unto Israel**" (chap. 14:5). The dew does its work by gentle contact, and it is quiet in its working. There is no sound of saw or hammer. GOD is as the lion against those who refuse to repent. He is as the dew unto every penitent soul, reviving weak and struggling life. "But," says the backslider, "I am in the dark, I have no comfort." Yes, but remember, the dew does its work in the dark. It distils in the night. In the night of your penitent grief let GOD deal with you in gentleness and love. This gentle dealing in the dark will prepare you for His coming as the morning, when your soul will be filled with the light of the sun of righteousness.

4. HE GIVES GROWTH. "**He shall grow as the lily.**" The lily grows rapidly. And when a backslider has truly repented, he may grow in grace with great rapidity. While living in sin he has not grown a particle. He has been stunted and withered. But with a consciousness of being healed, and loved freely, and now enveloped in GOD's care as the plant is enveloped in the refreshing dew, he cannot help growing like the lily.

5. HE GIVES STABILITY. "**He shall... cast forth his roots like Lebanon.**" The lily is frail. You can break it or uproot it with your finger. But not so with the cedar of Lebanon. Its roots go deep into the earth, and wrap themselves around the rocks. It can stand in the face of the storm, and defy its fury. So the penitent backslider, while he grows rapidly like the lily, will become

stable like the cedar. He fell because he lacked stability, but his sad experience has taught him not to rely at all upon his own strength, while he leans with all his weight upon the strength of GOD. Peter, by his unhappy fall at the trial of CHRIST, was cured of all boasting; he never fell again. He has now become truly a rock in his resistance of evil. David's fall was shameful, but his recovery was complete, and he never fell again. He grew like the lily, and was as strong as a cedar in Lebanon.

6. HE MAKES HIM BEAUTIFUL. "**His beauty shall be as the olive tree**" (chap. 14:6). The beauty of the lily is in its delicate texture and colouring. A touch or blot will mar it, and once marred it can never be restored.

The backslider need not expect to recover the virgin beauty of the lily which he had before sin blurred and bruised him. The scars of sin will remain even after the wound has been healed.

The olive tree, on the other hand, may not be in itself beautiful. It is often gnarled and crooked. Its beauty is chiefly in its fruitfulness. When the tree is full of olives you forget the unsightliness of its trunk and branches, while you gaze at the beauty of its fruit. So the penitent backslider, while he mourns the loss of the lily's beauty, may rejoice in the beauty of the olive's fruitfulness.

As Peter thought of his shameful backsliding, he doubtless strove to be more fruitful. He may have preached better at Pentecost as he thought of his swearing at the trial of JESUS, because he wished to make amends for the harm he had done. David, after his broken-hearted penitence, bore the fruit of the Fifty-first Psalm.

May GOD help us to make up for the loss of lily beauty by the beauty of olive fruitfulness.

~ end of chapter 8 ~
