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A Time to Return to the Lord

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TEXT: Hosea 4:1-3; 6:1; 14:1-2,4 (NIV)

Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Because of this the land dries up, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea are swept away.

"Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds."

Return, Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to him: "Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips." "I will heal their waywardness and love them freely,

2 Chronicles 7:14

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

Have you ever wondered what is the most significant factor in the life and health of a nation, or even in the life and health of a person or a group of people? As we head into the Lenten season and we prepare for that coming Easter celebration, many believers around the world, according to their tradition, celebrate a time of reflection and repentance through this period

as we head up towards that glorious time of Easter. And I want to prepare your hearts today with a message from God's word out of the opportunity that God has given us to return to him at any time, anywhere, at any place in our lives. And so, a time to return to the Lord. The Prophet Hosea was raised up by God to be a messenger to the Israelite people in a time when they were drifting away from the Lord. And as we read earlier in Hosea 4, the word of the Lord came to Hosea and he said,

Hear the word of the Lord, you, Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you, you who live in the land. There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There's only cursing and lying and murder and stealing and adultery. They all break all the bounds and bloodshed follows bloodshed.

Because of this, the land dries up and all who live in it waste away.

What is the most significant factor in the state of a nation or a state of a community or state of a person? And Hosea is pointing out here, the state of this entire nation of Israel was really based on their acknowledgement of God, their faithfulness to him, his ways, their faithfulness to each other. And also it had to do with their love for God and their love for one another. He's basically saying that a nation's state is directly related to that nation's state with him – that the way a nation or way individuals or a way a community of people stand before God has a great effect on the state of themselves.

And so we see this correlation here and we think about: what is the state of our nation, what are the state of the nations in the world? And what is that most significant factor affecting how we're doing, how we're thriving, how we're living. And God has told us that when nations or individuals or communities of people refuse to acknowledge God and they're not faithful to him and to his ways, and they're not faithful to one another and love drifts from their heart, they slowly move in a direction of drying up and shriveling and wasting away. We understand that before God, nations are really nothing to him. He sits on his throne in Heaven, and Earth is his footstool, and nations come and nations go. But the word of God stands forever, and our reverence for his word, our respect for his word, should be preeminent in our lives, no matter what nation were a part of. This is the way to life, the Bible tells us. And so God raised up the Prophet Hosea to bring a message to the Israelite nation when they were shriveling up, when they were drying up, when they were wasting away, those who were living in it. And the message came from Hosea. And it was it was clear, we see it in Hosea 6:1, he said, "Come, let us return to the Lord, for he's the one who's torn us to pieces, but he is the one who will heal us. He has injured us, but he is the one who will bind up our wounds." There's a time to return to the Lord.

You know, a great actress, Sandra Bullock, was given the Best Actress Academy Award in 2010 for her portrayal of Leigh Ann Tuohy in the movie *The Blind Side*. This great film chronicles a Christian family who took in a homeless young man and gave him the chance to reach his God-given potential. Michael Oher not only dodged the hopelessness of his dysfunctional inner-city upbringing, but he became the first round NFL draft pick for the Baltimore Ravens in 2009. At a recent fundraiser, Sean Tuohy, the husband of Leigh Ann, noted that the transformation of his family and of Michael all started with two words when they, LeAnn and Sean, spotted Michael walking along the road on a cold November morning in shorts and a T-shirt. Leigh Ann Tuohy uttered two words that changed their family's world. She told Sean "Turn around." They turned the car around, put Michael in their warm vehicle and ultimately adopted him into their family. Those same two words can change anyone's life, any community's life, any nation's life. When we turn around, we change directions and we begin moving in a journey. If we're moving in the wrong direction and we turn around, which is what the Prophet Hosea came saying to the Israelite people, "Come let us return to the Lord, turn around from moving in the wrong direction and move back towards the one who will heal us. Move back towards the one who can bind up our wounds."

You see, nothing is hidden from God. And though we may think that we're getting away with our rejection of him and our drifting from him, the truth of the matter is he sees all things and he knows all things. Judge Horace Gray of Boston, who would later go on to serve as a justice on the Supreme Court, once said to a man who escaped conviction on a technicality, he said this: "I know that you are guilty and you know it, and I wish you to remember that one day you will stand before a better and wiser judge and that there you will not be dealt with, according to technicalities of human law, but according to the perfect justice of God." When you and I are living our lives out here and in a world where we don't see God, we must remember that he knows all and he sees all.

And there is a time for us to be aware of what direction we're heading and how we're doing in our lives as individuals, as a people, as a nation. And the consequences of moving in the wrong direction cannot be overlooked. God clearly correlates the condition of a person's life, a community or even a nation with how they're relating to himself, how they're acknowledging his presence and his ways, how faithful they're being to him, how much love is in their hearts for him and for one another. And when we drift away from God the words of the Prophet Hosea, remind us again: come let us return to the Lord. There's a time to return to the Lord. He's the one who can heal us. He's the one who can bind us up. Nothing is hidden from his

sight. He knows all. You cannot escape his perfect insight and judgment and vision of all things.

Is it a time for you to return to the Lord today? Is it a time for us as a nation to be honest about the error of our ways, to come back to the one who can help us? In Hosea 14, near the end of the book, Hosea continues his message, he says, "Return, Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall. Take words with you in return to the Lord and say to him, 'Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously that we may offer you the fruit of our lips.'" The Prophet Hosea said to the people "Acknowledge that no foreign nation can save you. Acknowledge that your mighty military, your great political arrangement, cannot save you. Nothing that you've made with your own hands can save you. Acknowledge that is the Lord God who can bring you restoration." And it is this God who wants to do this. He wants to bring us back into his good graces and help us flourish as the good shepherd. It is he, the Lord, who can heal our waywardness. And is he, the Lord, who can give us his love freely.

In 1981, a Minnesota radio station reported a story about a stolen car in California. The police were staging an intense search for the vehicle and the driver, even to the point of placing announcements on local radio stations to contact the thief. On the front seat of the stolen car, sat a box of crackers that, unknown to the thief, were laced with poison. The car owner had intended to use the crackers as rat bait to kill some rats in his home. Now, the police and the owner of the Volkswagen bug were more interested in apprehending the thief to save his life than to recover the car. This call from Hosea that comes from the very heart of God for people to return back to him is not a call of wanting to bring punishment to people, but the grace and the kindness and the mercy of God. And the Bible says that God is being patient with the world, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance to a turning back. To turn around and come to the Lord and find life in him. The Prophet Hosea said to the people of Israel if they would turn back to the Lord, if they would, if they would return to him, he would be like dew to them. He would help them blossom like a lily. They would become like the cedars of Lebanon that send down roots so the young shoots would grow strong. Their splendor would become like an olive tree, their fragrance like the cedars of Lebanon. People would dwell again in their shade. They would flourish like the grain, they would blossom like the vine, their nation's fame would continue to grow like the wines of Lebanon. When these people were called back to God, he wanted to breathe life into them. God said, "If you'll turn back to me and cry out to me and you'll bring words to me and be repentant and confess your sins, I will answer you and I will care for you. Your your fruitfulness will come from me." "Who is wise?", the book of Hosea ends, "Let them realize these things. Who is discerning? Let

them understand the ways of the Lord are right. The righteous walk in them. But the rebellious stumble.”

There is a time to return to the Lord friends, and that time is now. We, to our own demise, drift away from God. God knows all and he sees all, and he is the one who, with blazing eyes of fire, is depicted in Revelation – he can see all the motives of every person's heart. There's no deed that's hidden from him. Nothing, nothing is kept secret from him. And he has the bronze feet that can trample out justice anytime, anywhere. He gives people time to repent, time to turn around, and time to come back to him. But he also allows people to move in the wrong direction. And he also allows people to self-corrupt. But if you're hearing today and his mercy is reaching to you and your heart is soft towards him, he's simply saying “There's a time also where you can turn back to me. And you can find life in me. And I'll be like a dew to you, and I'll help you blossom.” It may take a little time to get life back on track or heal the nation or move it in a better direction. But if you'll come back to me. I will do this for you. I will heal your land. You know, the Bible tells us that judgment actually begins with the people of God. And it is it is in our hands to first turn back and walk with him. 2 Chronicles 7:14, the famous verse, says “If my people,” God says this, “if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and I will forgive their sin and I will heal their land.”

Really, two words changed Michael Oehr's life. And it's two words that can change anyone's life. If they're moving away from God, if they'll just turn around, and start moving back towards God, they'll be moving towards the source of life. They'll be moving in the direction of the one who wants to bring them salvation and hope and power and grace and peace and healing. There is a time to turn around friends. And perhaps as you evaluate your life today, it's a time for you. As we move into this Lenten season, which is a season of repentance and even many this Wednesday will go and get ashes placed on their forehead as a as a symbol of the death of Christ and also a symbol of repenting in ashes. Maybe it's a time for you to seriously evaluate where you're at before the Lord. And ask yourself, “Am I moving in the right direction? Is there something in my heart that's displeasing to God? Something I need to repent of? Are there activities, behaviors in my life that I need to turn away from to turn around and move back towards the one who can truly help me and heal me and give me hope and salvation?” If this is you, friend, and you sense the Holy Spirit speaking to you in your heart today, why not just come before him with humility? Bow your knee to him. Tell him you're sorry. Tell him you've been believing a lie, you've been led astray and that you want to come back home. You want to come back into his good graces. It's when the people of God

begin to do this in a deep and meaningful way that the start of healing starts to come into their lives and into their communities and then into the nation. Lord, we need this.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your word, which teaches us without error what to believe and how to live. As we consider your word today and as we head towards the Easter season, perhaps there are some listening who are hearing this and really, you're speaking to their heart, helping them see for the first time that the state of our nation, the state of communities, and the state of our own hearts is directly related to how we acknowledge you, how we acknowledge your ways, how we respect and revere and love one another. And we have strayed from this in so many ways. So, forgive us, Lord, and forgive us as individuals and in your kindness, lead us into repentance, towards movement, toward you, towards the fullness of life. We need your help in this father, so work this in us by the power of your spirit. Thank you so much for your grace, your kindness, your mercy, and your holiness. Have mercy on our nation. Help us humble ourselves and seek your face and call upon your name that you would heal our land. We pray this in the matchless and powerful name of Jesus. Amen.