

“THE EXILE’S RETURN”

(II Samuel 14:14)

“For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again; neither doth God respect any person: yet doth he devise means, that his banished be not expelled from him.”

The Bible writes it down as an unfailing rule that “whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap.” In his earlier life, King David had sown the seeds of adultery and murder, and now he was beginning to reap what he had sown. In the thirteenth chapter of Second Samuel, Amnon, one of David’s sons, raped his own sister, Tamar. And so the adultery that David had earlier committed with Bathsheba found him out. And then, two years later, another of David’s sons, Absalom, avenged the wrong done to his sister, Tamar, by murdering Amnon. So David’s murder of Uriah also found him out. But Absalom knew that murder was a felony that David the *King* could not overlook, so he fled in fear to foreign soil for asylum. But David as *father* could not forget his fugitive son. His lonely heart yearned for his son to come home. So he spent his days in an upstairs room on the east side of the palace looking out an east window across the Jordan toward the land of Geshur where his son, Absalom, was in exile.

David had in his household a keen-eyed general of his army, a man named Joab. It grieved Joab deeply to see his royal master so full of sorrow, so he devised a clever plot to get David to pardon Absalom and bring him home again. He secured the help of a tactful woman from Tekoah who had great dramatic power. At Joab’s request, she made herself up as a mourner, memorized the story Joab gave her, and was given an audience before the king. Then she told her story.

Falling on her face before the King, she declared, “I am a widow. A few days ago, my two sons fought with each other in the field. There was no one there to separate them, and one of them killed the other. My relatives and neighbors are now demanding the surrender and death of my one remaining son. So they would quench my one remaining coal, and there will be no fire of love left on the hearthstone of my heart.”

With this pathetic statement, the woman of Tekoah closed her appeal. But her story accomplished its intended purpose. David’s great and tender heart was moved with pity for her. “Go to your house,” he tells her. “Your son will be safe. As the Lord lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground.” But in that stroke of impulsive pity, the King had betrayed his own deep feelings for his own son Absalom. Instantly, the woman leapt through the opening, and made the appeal which Joab had carefully fixed in her mind. He had granted mercy to *her* child; should he not do as much for his *own*? Will he now be guilty of an inconsistency that will continue to hurt both himself and his son? Why not grant himself the same indulgence he granted her, and fetch his son home? And then, in the fourteenth verse of this chapter, she placed the capstone on her entire argument.

The woman said to King David, “*For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again; neither doth God respect any person: yet doth he devise means, that his banished be not expelled from him.*” This verse is one of the great sentences of inspiration. It is amazing to see how perfectly this story parallels the Gospel of the New Testament, the Gospel of reconciliation between a holy God and sinful man. I would like to briefly explore these remarkable parallels in this study.

I. Parallel Crimes

First, there are *parallel crimes* in the two stories. The first parallel is this: *Just as Absalom was banished from the presence of his father David because of his crime against his father’s throne, so man is banished from the Presence of God because of his sin.* The fugitive Absalom is a symbol of every man who is estranged from God by his sin.

It should be obvious to any observant eye that man as we know him is in a state of exile and separation from God. Absalom’s crime had banished him from the face of his father. He no longer had a right to the king’s court. Man’s sin has banished him from the Presence of God, and he no longer has a “right to the tree of life.” Ever since the first transgression, sin has always been separating man from God. Adam and Eve sinned, and were driven out of the Garden. Cain sinned, and “went out” from the Presence of God. Jacob sinned against his father and his brother, and “went out” from his home into far-away Mesopotamia. Gehazi sinned, and “went out” from Elisha’s presence a leper as white as snow. Peter sinned, and “went out” from the presence of Jesus and wept bitterly. Judas sinned, and the Bible says “he went out, and it was night.” In his classic book, The Great Divorce, C. S. Lewis pictured hell by very great distance between houses. People keep moving farther and farther from God and each other.

Sin always drives the individual out from the Presence of God. In Isaiah 59:1-2, the Bible says, “Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear.” Where sin is, it is digging the chasm ever broader between us and God. It was into a far country that the prodigal son went, and every man who forgets God finds himself in the same exile.

But what sin is it that works this breach between us and God? It is the sin of selfishness, the sin of a man living for himself, ministering to himself, coddling and pampering himself, living all wrapped up in himself. Christian counselor Leanne Payne wrote, “To step outside of love is to step back into the hell of self and separation. It is to step from co-inherence of all things into in-coherence. We choose to love God and others; or, pridefully, we choose self-love instead.”

A woman deplaned from a turbulent plane flight. She expressed her bewilderment over the Captain’s “counsel” which she had received in-flight when the flight attendant told him how upset the woman was over the turbulence. The Captain came back to the woman and said, “Ma’am, look out this window. Do you see the blinking light? Now, the other side. Another blinking light. As long as we stay between those two lights, we are safe.” This sounds like the counsel of humanism, which has discarded all absolutes and lets each person choose his own

morality and direction in life. On the plane, *the lights were not a path at all, but were carried aboard the vehicle and were locked into the performance of the aircraft itself.* This is precisely like the sin of selfishness. Because of this sin, God is forgotten, and He is not a vital, living reality in the individual's life. The sinner is banished and isolated from God.

In this state of banishment, a person's life is utterly useless. Those three years that Absalom spent in Geshur, loafing and lounging around the court, were lost and wasted years. In the wise woman's words, they were like "water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again." And it is this way for every person who is away from God and not active in His service. He is busy, but what is he really achieving? He is feeding and clothing himself, raising a family, perhaps building a home, but to what purpose? His is a treadmill existence. He lives like a man trapped in a revolving door, going round and round, but getting nowhere. Every minute away from God is a wasted minute, a minute which you must account for when you stand before Him.

Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard once compared the life of a godless man to a smooth, flat stone that is thrown across the surface of a pond. The stone skims and skips and sails over the surface of the water until that moment comes (and it comes *quickly*) when, like life without God and without hope, it runs out of momentum and sinks into nothingness.

But there is a far more solemn truth in our text. Note the difference between the word "*banished*" and the word "*expelled*" in verse fourteen. The "banishment" is temporary, but the "expulsion" is permanent. These are words which a *student* should understand. At school, it was a serious thing to be *suspended*, but not nearly so serious as it was to be *expelled*. The suspension was temporary; the expulsion was permanent. And even so, the human being who is unsaved at this moment is living in a suspended banishment from God, and God wants it to be only temporary. He is "not willing that *any* should perish, but *that all* should come to repentance." But if the unsaved individual continues in his rejection of Christ and his unbelief, he closes the door on that Love for which he were made, and goes out into the night of eternal death. If you are such an individual, I beseech you, in Christ's name, be reconciled to God today!

II. Parallel Compassions

Then there is a second parallel between this story and the Gospel. There are *parallel compassions* in the two stories. *Just as David still loved Absalom in spite of his crime, so God still loves you and me in spite of our sins.*

During the three years of Absalom's exile, the Bible says in II Samuel 13:39 that "David's soul longed to go forth unto his son Absalom." His son was separated from him, but he was never forgotten. But there is nothing strange about David's love. When he stood at the east window, gazing across the Jordan toward Geshur, he was only manifesting a *natural* love for his son. As wretched as Absalom was, he was still David's son, part of his body and soul. Furthermore, we must remember that when David loved Absalom, it was only one sinner loving another. But the marvel of God's love for man is that the holy God can, and does, love the sinner. It is hard for us to love the unworthy and the unlovable, but the Bible says that "God demonstrated His love for us in that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans

5:8). C. S. Lewis, in his classic book about Satan and his cohorts, Screwtape Letters, pictures the devil presiding at one of the councils of hell. In his opening address, Satan says to his cohorts, “Remember, as disgusting as it may seem to you, God really loves those weak and filthy human vermin that crawl the earth.” And just as David could not give Absalom up even though he had sinned, even so God refuses to give *you* up though you have grievously forgotten Him, betrayed His mercy, and sinned against Him.

In the woman’s pathetic speech, she had said, “They will quench my remaining coal, and there will be no fire of love left on the hearthstone of my heart.” One of her sons had murdered the other, but she still had a smoldering love for him in her heart. And so it was with *David* in his love for *Absalom*. And so it is with *God* in His love for you!

In the center of Jewish religious life, there was an altar, and on this altar, a fire burned continuously. The law said, “The fire shall ever be burning upon the altar; it shall never go out.” To every devout worshiper, that flame was an emblem of the inexhaustible and unquenchable love of God for man. The love of David, which went out ceaselessly to Absalom during his exile, is a poor human type of the love of God which goes out continuously to this rebel race of sinning men.

The account is related of a group of Arab tourists who were visiting in Switzerland. While on a guided tour one day, they were brought to the foot of a high waterfall. They were captivated by it. When the group prepared to leave, their guide could not pull the Arabs away. “We want to wait until it stops,” they pleaded. They could not conceive of water going on forever. I cannot conceive of God still loving man in spite of the atrocities we have been guilty of in rejecting Him and abusing His mercies, but it is still true.

“O God, how Thou canst love me, And be the God Thou art,
Is darkness to my intellect, But sunshine to me heart.”

In Jeremiah 31:3, God said to man, “I have loved thee with an everlasting love.” Just as David’s love went out to Absalom during his exile, God’s love goes out to you today. The love of God is just like human love in this respect, that God rejoices in the nearness of His children, but He is wounded by their willful and wicked absence. I was in a home some time ago in which the parents had just given up their last child in marriage. I made a remark about the well-furnished, well-kept house. The mother replied, “Yes, I try to keep the house clean and orderly, but I wouldn’t mind the furniture being upset if the children were only home again.” God is like that. God has seriously “upset the furniture” of His own household to regain rebel man, and He lovingly looks across the distance that separates you from Himself, and longs for you to come home.

III. Parallel Courses

There is a third and final parallel between this story and the Gospel. The two stories suggest *parallel courses*. *Just as David devised means to reconcile his banished rebel son to himself, so God has devised means to reconcile a rebel race of men to Himself.*

In the story in our text, there was a conflict in the heart of David. David the *King*, as the administrator of justice, could not overlook Absalom's crime. But David the *father* could not forsake his son. He hated the sin, but loved his son. And God had the same problem when He devised a way to save man from sin. What was He to do? Should He ignore sin, and accept the sinner and his sins? No, for "He is of purer eyes than to behold sin," and tolerate it in His Presence. Then, should He destroy the fallen race of men? He could have done that with justice; but God is more than justice; God is also love. If man was to return to God, Love would have to find a way. God's problem was how to be "just, *and the justifier*" of sinners.

Thomas Chalmers, the great British scientist and preacher, said, "This is a problem fit for a god." And He solved it like the God that He is! There was nothing free, easy, or simple about His solution. More than we shall ever know had to be planned and endured before the way of reconciliation stood open. We can never speak the words "Bethlehem," "Gethsemane," or "Calvary," without a mysterious sense of the terrible cost God had to pay to make our restoration possible.

Some are trying to tell us that forgiveness is a free-wheeling, simple, easy transaction. The German poet, Heinrich Heine, echoed this view when he was asked if God would forgive a crimson sin. He replied, "Forgive? Certainly He will forgive; that's His business!" But if you have ever forgiven any one for a terrible act of evil committed against you, you will know that forgiveness is neither automatic nor easy. It involves pain, cost, tension, and agony. At this point, there is a gigantic breakdown in the parallels between the two stories, David/Absalom and God/man. David's action was similar to God's action up to a certain point, but then the similarities come to an abrupt end. Both David and God devised means to restore the banished sinners again. David sent Joab to bring Absalom home; but *God sent His only begotten Son to bring us home*. In II Corinthians 5:19, the Bible says, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not counting their sins against them." The coming of Christ was the capstone of all the devices which God used to restore a prodigal planet to Himself.

But what a difference there is between David's forgiveness of Absalom and God's forgiveness of sinners! David's forgiveness was a *cheap* forgiveness — he simply pardoned Absalom without requiring any change of mind and heart. Absalom came home unchanged, without any change of mind and heart, without repentance for his sin. And the consequences of such forgiveness are clearly seen in this story. Absalom came home, still a rebel, and led a revolt that drove his father from the throne and caused much grief in the kingdom. What a far cry this is from God's forgiveness!

C. S. Lewis said, "Man is not just an imperfect creature — he is a rebel." A part of his rebellion is to make "mild moves" toward God, when an autonomy-shattering, ego-reducing reconciliation is called for. Many have entered the church today on the basis of a "cheap forgiveness," but they did not enter the Kingdom of God. God's forgiveness is *free*, but it is not *cheap*. It *cost* everything, and *demand*s everything. However a man may be identified with the outward church, he is still foreign to God if he has not abandoned himself and all he is and has to God and His will. If God's forgiveness simply consisted of wiping out the sins of your past and

tearing up all your moral and spiritual IOUs, none of God's designs in forgiving you would be accomplished. This is the reason a sinner must pass through the dark and tearful vale of *repentance* to find God — because God will never be guilty of bestowing on anyone a cheap forgiveness.

Since *repentance* and *faith* are integral and vital parts of the “means” God has devised to restore us to Himself, it is necessary that we understand these terms. There are several key words in the Bible translated by the word “repent.” The main ideas are those of *rethinking, reversing direction, and reconstructing life*.

The primary Biblical word for repentance (*metanoia*) means to “change the mind.” It involves a total rethinking of the usual and natural views of God, life, sin and salvation. Several years ago, during the United States Open tennis tournament, Switzerland's top male player, Marc Rosset, lost a match and was thrust out of the tournament. He was scheduled to fly back to Switzerland on Wednesday night of that week on Swissair Flight 111. However, Rosset decided at the last minute to stay in New York one more night before returning home. Swissair Flight 111 crashed into the sea off the coast of Nova Scotia and all lives aboard were lost. I saw the press conference televised on ESPN the next day in which Rosset was interviewed. Among other things, he said, “*It is an awesome feeling to realize you should have died, but that you changed your mind and because of that you are still alive.*” Read that sentence carefully. It contains a great description of the basic meaning of repentance. *I should have died, but I changed my mind, and because of that, I am still alive. What an awesome thanksgiving should be mine!*

Sin means that you are forcing your life in the wrong direction, down a wrong course. I quote C. S. Lewis again (he seemed to have such incredible insight into these spiritual matters of the heart and of salvation). “If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man. There is nothing progressive about being pig-headed and refusing to admit a mistake. Going back is the quickest way forward.”

Eugene Peterson, Presbyterian pastor in Bel Air, Maryland, told of tipping his lawnmower on its side one day to remove its blade. He was struggling to remove the nut when a neighbor said, “The threads on the bolt go the other way. Turn the other way.” Peterson testified that when he reversed the direction, the blade was easily removed. “Turn the other way.” This is the basic meaning of repentance. Have you repented of your sins? Has your mind been changed *so that you now agree with God?*

The other vital “means” God has devised to restore you to Himself is *faith*. “By grace are ye saved *through faith*.” In faith, both the *exercise* and the *object* are important. I recently read an old story that illustrates both the exercise and the object of faith. In 1918 a British Navy destroyer brought Prime Minister Lloyd George across the English Channel. A furious storm arose. The ship could not dock in Dover. A launch was brought alongside, but he couldn't board it. Both the destroyer and the launch were pitching and rolling alarmingly in the high waves. The Prime Minister was in danger of falling into the sea. Five men were stationed at a strategic place in the launch. George was led to the gangway of the destroyer. At the command, “Go,” he

was to advance and release his hold. The ship rolled down, the officer shouted, "Go!" and the Prime Minister dropped into the hands of the men on the launch. *Faith involves a complete letting go and a complete committing of yourself utterly to Jesus Christ. In true faith, you let go of all previous supports, and cast yourself only upon One, Jesus Christ Himself. You must loose your hold on good character or good works, on church membership or baptism -- in fact, on everything that might take the place of Jesus Christ.* The only proper and adequate object for true faith is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Your faith must be placed in Him and in the Price He paid for your sins on the cross.

Let me close this study by appealing to you with the same kind of urgency employed in the text. The woman said, "*We (all) must needs die, and are like water spilled out on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again.*" What a solemn reminder this is of our mortality and our responsibility to God. Think of the clear and urgent declarations that are made here about each of us. (1) Your life is like water. Water is a gift of God, and *your life is a gift of God.* (2) Water is very precious, and *your life is very precious.* Both water and human life are so common that we take them for granted, but we should not do so. (3) Water must be stored in some reliable vessel if it is to be retained, and *your life is stored in the vessel of your human body so that it can be sustained.* (4) Water may be thrown away, squandered, and wasted, and this is also true of your life. I have been to many countries on this planet where the water supply is abused, misused, unimproved, and cannot be trusted. The same may be true of your life. Because of your poor personal stewardship, your life may be abused, misused, and unimproved. (5) Water may be "spilt," apparently a misuse that is unintended and involuntary. *You may lose your life,* as if by accident, *at any time.* (6) When water is "spilt out on the ground," it "cannot be gathered up again." Such an act is final. *And when you die, your death is final and permanent.* So it is very urgent that you deal now with the truths of this message.

Both the restoration of some sinners and the final banishment of others in this text are acts of God. You will either be saved into God's Presence by His grace, or finally expelled from His Presence by His holy justice. One is a loving act, the other is a legal act. But they are both acts of God. Every moment you live is lived in relation to God — either in a bad relationship with Him or a good one. Either one of sin, rebellion and unbelief, or one of faith, submission and trust. You are a sinner, banished from God, and in danger of eternal expulsion from His Presence. But "God has devised means" to save *you*, dear friend. He sent His Son to die on an awful cross for your sins. He sent His Holy Spirit to direct you to Himself and to give you His Life. He arranges communicating moments like this one to let you know the terms of His salvation. And He fully expects you to use the means He has devised to save you.

Why not speak to Jesus right now in your own words, saying something like this: "Lord, I am a helpless and hopeless sinner, and my sins deserve Your judgment. But You tell me that You have loved me and died on the cross for my sins. You also say that if I will trust You and You alone, You will save me as I trust You. So I do now trust You and only You. Save me, Jesus. Come into my life, forgive my sin, and give me Your Gift of Eternal Life. I trust You now, and thank You for keeping Your Word. Now, take my life and make of it something useful and pleasant to Yourself. In Your Name I pray. Amen."