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Sermon preached by Mr. J.K. Popham at "Ebenezer", Clapham
on Monday evening 1st. June, 1936.

Text: Hosea 14.1 & 2

"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: so will we render the calves of our lips."

Only God knows how many professors of religion are satisfied with their profession: grow in confidence in themselves, have self-wisdom, self-satisfaction, self-strength, self-guidance, self-discernment, and have no bands in their death. They are wise in their own conceit, they understand the gospel, they are pleased with the doctrines of it, they have embraced those doctrines: no searching, pleased with preaching, even will listen to searching preaching with no trouble concerning themselves, and they go down, they fall. They fall lower in regard of conscience, they fall lower in regard of prayer, searching, seeking, waiting on and for God. It is a solemn matter to all who make observations in our little churches, to see members who, more or less, distinctly answer to this brief description. Very solemn is the position of such people, they are barren, unfruitful, of no use to the Church, rather a hindrance, a burden. If they pray in public there is no edification: if they are members they do not walk properly, that is comely, quite able to criticise, but not able to discern the work of the Spirit. These are worldly professors, they seem to have a kind of religious worthiness in a kind of profession, but no dealings with God, no dealings with their own conscience. These are not in the text; God does not speak to them here in the text. He says, O Israel, My people. A very solemn word. O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God. Thou hadst communion with Me, thou didst enjoy the truth, thou didst fall under its rebukes, thou receivedst My law, the law of love and of liberty; thou camest again and again to the Throne of Grace, and I received thee and granted communications to thee; thou saidst that thou wouldst walk before Me; I made a covenant with thee; thou didst profess that I was thy God, and that thou wert content with Me, and would have no other gods beside Me. Thou saidst again and again that thou didst not mind what thou mightest suffer, what loss, affliction, or trouble, so as that I was thy portion. Then thou becamest over-confident, and didst fall way. "Thou hast fallen by thine iniquity." A solemn Scripture which, should it be opened and applied to those to whom it might well be applied, would bring them to their knees,

would awaken their conscience, would tell them something about the evil state they are in.

"Thou hast fallen". What from? Thou hast fallen from watchfulness. The Scripture said to Israel, "Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life." Israel might go back to days and weeks and months when there was a jealousy over their own heart, when they were afraid of sinning wilfully, when their conscience was tender, when they sought the Lord about everything; and after a time the flesh grew indifferent, the conscience became indifferent, and the flesh grew in some authority, and so watchfulness was lost. You can never lose watchfulness over your conscience, over God's dealings, over His Scripture, and not suffer. If you have fallen from watchfulness you do not look for the Master, you do not wait for Him, you do not therefore get honour. He that waiteth for his Master shall be honoured: but losing watchfulness things are different. You are indifferent to your conscience, indifferent to the Scripture, indifferent to the Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God; and then you get hard, you get hard. That Scripture is fulfilled in you, and yet you may not know it or suspect it, "Take heed lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God". A sad fall that is.

When you fall from watchfulness, the next thing is you fall from prayer. A form you may keep up, kneel down perhaps frequently, but you do not labour to get near to God, do you? Do you labour in confessing your sins? Do you labour in confessing your ignorance, and in entreating the teaching of the Spirit? Do you feel the defilement of your conscience under this, and therefore you cry mightily for the blood of Christ? Are not your circumstances more or less, in your hands, so to speak, and you do not bring them every day, and perhaps, as formerly, oftentimes in a day, crying to God to guide you, order your footsteps by His Word, control your heart by His Spirit, manage your thoughts by His power, lead you more and more into the mystery of godliness? You can manage better than you used to do, that is to say, there is a vain confidence, and you have fallen from prayer.

You have fallen from the Scripture, though you believe it, though if anyone contradicted the inspiration of the Scripture you might feel indignant, but what about searching, what about digging for the wisdom of God, as for hid treasure? What about hiding the Word of God in your heart, that you might not sin against Him? What are the promises you hope the Lord has spoken to you? You have fallen from the Scripture, you have fallen from searching and trying your ways. All matters are quite comfortable, why should you be so concerned? Matters are quite comfortable, you have

fallen from searching, from suspicion of your words, fallen from that watching the abominable self which formerly you did. You are not afraid now of yourself as you used to be, and therefore you are not afraid of the company you keep. So that you are with professors who may talk glibly and loudly about religion and have nothing to do with secret matters; it doesn't matter to you. You have fallen that way. You have fallen from waiting on God.

Now what does this fall mean besides what I have named? It means you go to other gods. No, one says. You do! There is one god we all fall to as quickly as we can when conscience is silent about it. The greatest god, the greatest idol we ever can have is self. You have fallen into confidence in yourself. I would not do that, you will say. I would not allow that, that is what you say. Confidence in self. You have fallen into indifference to the smile of God. So long as you can talk about religion, in this condition, the smile of God is not desired. If it is spoken of, you scarcely understand what is meant, because you are in a bad, barren state, and you have fallen, to look at this great idol self. You would not sympathise with Rutherford in this your fallen state. O! said he, that I had not a myself. You would not understand John Bradford, who, in prison, said that during the time he had been there, he had been wicked, lustful, proud, self-seeking, and everything that is evil. O! you would say, that is legal, he is in bondage. O! if God would give me that legality, if He would give me that bondage, if He would give you who may be in a fallen state that legality, that bondage!

"Thou hast fallen by thine iniquity". Grievous! Remember iniquity was idolatry, and you have fallen into it: the iniquity was neglect of God, and you have fallen into it; the iniquity was neglect of His Word, you have fallen into it and by it, and woe! woe! while this condition of mind continues, the soul is far from God. It is heaping up wrath, it is heaping up a solemn dealing that God will have with you in future, for He will certainly deal with His people. He says, O Israel, you have fallen, and you have been iniquitous, you have fallen by your iniquity. Now this may seem a very hopeless case, and without God it would be. But, He said, Return unto the Lord thy God, you have been unkind to Me, I am merciful, you have treated Me basely, and though I am jealous with a great jealousy, I say to you, Return to Me. This is one of the most wonderful words in the Bible, Return to Me. Jeremiah was inspired to write, quoting a word from Numbers, "They say, if a man marry a wife, and put her away, and she become another man's, shall he return to her again, shall not the man be greatly polluted?" The land that tolerated that would be greatly polluted.

Yet (O that God would speak to us yet) "Thou hast played the harlot with many lovers." O Israel return to Me, I am merciful; thou hast destroyed thyself, but in Me is thy help.

What is this returning? It is returning by the power of the Holy Ghost to a tenderness of conscience. Conscience is now awakened; it says, You have been into the world, you have hardened your heart against God, you have gone after idols, you have forsaken Him in all pure, spiritual worship, you have become a formalist at the best, you have departed from God. And now He says, "Return", and that touches conscience. The conscience says to the soul O! what have you done? What has been your occupation? How far you have got away from God! You have had a false peace, a ruinous quietness, a waster of your conscience, and yet this merciful God says, "Return"; and then says the sinner, How shall I return? I blush and am ashamed to lift up my face unto God. How shall I go to Him? It is difficult. It is difficult to believe, until God causes you to believe, that you may return to Him. You say, Now I remember how I went astray. My Beloved came to His garden, He laid meat before me, He said, "Eat, O friends, yea! drink abundantly, O beloved". Then He came and knocked at my door, and said, Open to Me, My love, He used a term of sweet endearment. But she was asleep, her heart as hard as a piece of ice. No! she had various excuses, she was so comfortable in her easy condition, that she refused to rise and open to her Lover, her Lord and Saviour. He would not be put off entirely, so He puts His hand in through the hole of the door, and leaves grace behind Him, myrrh, leaves it on the lock, and she opens it and finds Him gone. He had withdrawn Himself. His jealous heart was hurt, it was wounded, and so to teach her a solemn and necessary lesson, He had withdrawn. "My Beloved had withdrawn". But now she was awake, she was earnest, and went into the streets, and everywhere she thought she might find Him.

David went a long way from his God, he lived months a long way from his God, his heart got very hardened, his mind became very blind, his conscience was very hard. A parable setting out before him his sin was not enough. No! injuring a wife and murdering her husband hardened him, and so it needed the sword. "Thou art the man." Then David began to return. "Have mercy upon me O Lord, have mercy upon me, wash me thoroughly from my sin". Do you understand that return? Peter got a long way from his Master: he went so far as to say with loud words and curses, that he did not know Him. You think you would not do that. If you go into temptation with a hardened mind and conscience, you would do it. Who would not, if not kept? The Lord brought him back, a look brought Peter back. He returned, weeping bitterly, and Christ knew that and pitied him, so when He sent

a message to His disciples, He put in Peter particularly. "Say to My disciples, and Peter..." O! do not leave Peter out. He denied Me, but I will not deny him; he broke his covenant with Me, for he protested that he would not deny Me, if everybody else did he would not; he broke that covenant, but I remember My covenant with him. Peter returned. You will find that with God, (if any of you be fallen by your iniquity) you will find when the Lord says, Return, you will do it. Where the word of the King is there is power.

But then shame comes, fear rises. How shall I get back? This distance! These forsakings! This unfaithfulness! This worldliness! The iniquities I have been guilty of! I blush and am ashamed to lift up my face to God. If I go to Him what shall I say? I have no excuse, what shall I say? The Lord meets this case with His kindness. "Take with you words." Words that you could not coin yourself, words that you would think presumptuous words if they came into your mind of yourself, or if someone said them to you. Put your face that way, take with you words; if the face was to Jerusalem, now you set your face stedfastly. Turn to Him, leave your idols, leave yourself, think not of any excuses: God will, (if I may for a moment turn aside) God will kill at this time the Adamic spirit that made Adam say, excusing himself, The woman that Thou gavest me tempted me. No! that will not do, it is yourself. Take with you words, turn to the Lord - that is, pray. Begin to pray again, not in the form but in the Spirit, not with your words, but with My words given to you, dictated in your heart by My Spirit. Take with you words, these great words, and "say unto Me, Take away all iniquity." Would you go to God against whom you have committed all iniquity, and say to Him, Take it all away? This is bold. If it were without the Spirit's dictation it would be presumption, wicked presumption, horrible sin; but now the Lord says, You bring this to Me, bring My own dictation to Me, put Me in mind of those words given to you, put Me in remembrance of My covenant, remember My holy promise. This gives a singular boldness. This is what Paul speaks of, "Come boldly unto the Throne of Grace." This sets before Israel the Holy of Holies, the incense of Christ's mediation, covering the wretch, the sinner. This brings before him the mercy seat to which now he is invited, to which now he is enabled by the power of the Spirit to come, confessing his iniquity. Now that becomes a truth, (it was not written in Hosea's day, but the spirit of it was there,) "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins."

The bar between God and Israel in this case was iniquity, and the bar in my case, in your cases, is the same - iniquity, bad dealings,

unkindness to the best Friend. Worldliness heaped up in your mind, what shall I eat, what shall I drink, wherewithal shall I be clothed? How shall I provide for my family, what shall I do in this? The difficulties are great, you forget God, you forget Him all the time. I prayed, you forgot Him! I sought the Lord; you forgot Him! "This people draw near to Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me." I wish I did not understand that, but I do, and it is iniquity, heaped up, a mountain, this iniquity deep in its guilt, this iniquity which had power over me to turn me away from God. And now, am I to take it to Him and ask Him to take it away? This brings the atonement before us. What can remove guilt but the blood of Christ? What can make a burdened, troubled, ashamed conscience peaceful and happy, but the blood of Christ? O the solemn searchings, the depression of heart, the fears of mind, the burden on the conscience, the trouble in the spirit, the questions. But, says God all of these are met, say to Me, say to Me, Take away all iniquity. "With the Lord there is forgiveness that He may be feared", and "Who is a God like unto Thee, that passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage; He retaineth not His anger for ever." Think of it. Take it all away. There is such an experience as forgiveness, there is such a happiness as a purified conscience, there is such a gracious dealing of God with sinners, as to make them sing while ashamed.

Well, should there be fallen people here to whom God speaks this great, gracious, wonderful word, "Take away all iniquity", you will find it in your heart to go to Him. The difference (if I may put it in here) the difference between the law of works and the covenant of grace is remarkable in this point, that the law of works condemns for one sin, and provides no remedy. That is where we all are as a consequence of the fall. One offence brought death, but the covenant of grace, as I think Dr Owen uses the word, has latitude. It does not provide that the happy people in that covenant, who cannot finally fall, shall never sin, but it provides forgiveness, many forgivenesses. "Many a time forgave He their iniquities, and did not stir up all His wrath". Think of it! "If the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works?" I was struck recently in reading Luther. He says, Heaps, rivers, oceans of sins are forgiven! A great word,- oceans of sins - and when you get this word you will have a sweet hope of forgiveness, and you will wait on God. "Receive us graciously." Receive

us. You remember it is written in the gospel of Luke thus, "Then drew near unto Him all the publicans and sinners for to hear Him: and the Scribes and and Pharisees murmured, saying, This Man receiveth sinners and eateth with them". He draws and receives them graciously. You might be offended and the offender apologises, and repents, and you are bound by the Scriptures to forgive him but if he came to you, you might be very ungracious in your manner, you might impress upon him very certainly and painfully that you would rather he did not come. But not so the Lord. O! the smile the sinner gets. He meets this great, this merciful, this kind, this loving reception, it gets into his heart, into every feeling of his soul, into every cranny of his being, so to speak; it gets right into him, with astonishment, and wonder, a miracle of grace. What! this kindness? Is this the manner of man, O Lord, that I, the worst of sinners should receive the best of blessings? "Receive us graciously", and He does it. God never puts a word into the mouth of a sinner, a confessing sinner, to dishonour it. You, by faith, may put Him to the test, and you will find that He honours His own Word; He will always honour it and you will one day say, He did honour it, He magnified His Word above all His Name. Receive us graciously, lovingly. The doctrine of the gospel drops as the rain and His heavenly speech distils as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb. It falls quietly and gently on the grass, not a heavy shower all in a moment to run away, there is no loss in this small rain. Recently there have been heavy showers, and some of them fell on hard ground, and ran away a good deal; now the surface softened, receives the rain more kindly, and when the Lord softens the heart for the reception, it percolates, gets to the root of things. That makes you bold to urge your prayer, makes you importunate of your hope, that makes it brighten up your hope and love, and that makes it warm. A gracious reception is a wonderful thing. The Lord does not put the man away, does not, if one may so express it, keep him at arm's length, but He smiles on him. "Thy words were found and I did eat them, and Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart." It did me good. Do not My words do good like a medicine? Do they not cure all sickness, bring health and cure? Yes! God said it, and He does it.

"Receive us graciously." When you can venture to go in this way, as ordered and wrought in you by the Spirit, then you will find this Word, and be received well. He receives you; Christ receives you, then you get to the Father through the Spirit and the Father says, I will receive you, and I will walk and with you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. And the Spirit receives you. He went away; your unkind

treatment, your indifference to His operations wounded Him. He was turned to be your enemy, left you to yourself, then sent rebukes into your conscience, but now He receives you, and He is a welcome guest. You sing,

"Unworthy dwelling"! Glorious guest!
Favour astonishing, divine!"

Now what do these people do when they come to their Lord, when they return to Him? What do they do? "We will render the calves of our lips." We will praise Him. We will zealously praise Him. The praises of the Most High God are in their lips. Hart writes, in one beautiful hymn, - and I always regret that this verse was omitted -

"Brethren, let us praise the Lord,
Exalt His blessed Name;
Let us hear and keep His Word;
His glory be our aim.
Let us resolutely strive
To work God's work with full intent.
And what is it? To believe
On Him whom He hath sent."

And that is praising Him, that glorifies Him. Do you say, I could not think I should ever be able to glorify God? Now listen. "Whoso offereth praise glorifieth Me". Amen.

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