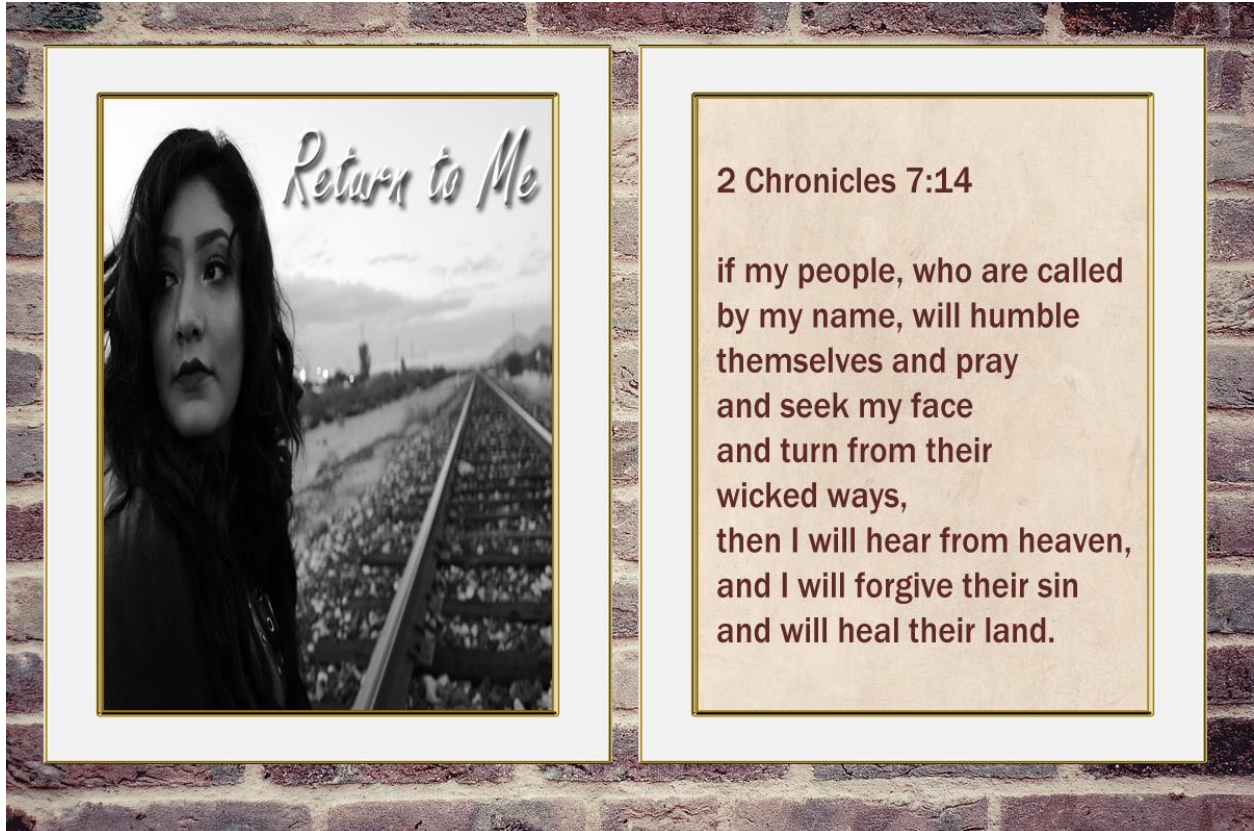


8/25/24

**“RETURN TO ME”**

**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.**



**Special Music: “Return to Me”**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mlq5RNnbEus>

## **HOME COMING**

The Rev. Charles Mallory heard his phone ringing in the office. He had left it there while he took his morning walk around the church looking for things that needed to be done. Quickening his pace, he tried to reach his office in time to answer the phone, but it stopped ringing the moment he stepped through the door. Taking the time to see who had called, he noticed it was an unknown number and they hadn't left a message. He thought about calling them back to see who it was, but there was so much to do before Sunday services. The Reverend figured they would call him back if they really needed him.

He didn't mind that everyone in town called him Reverend Chuck. He had been the pastor at First Community Church for twelve years and since there were only four churches in town, First Community, First United Methodist Church, St. Agnes Catholic Church, and Seeds of Grace Baptist Church, everybody knew he was. He considered the other pastors, close friends. They had been there for him when his wife Sylvia had passed four years ago to cancer. What a hard time that had been for Chuck and his son Matthew, who was sixteen at the time. But the other pastors in town had gathered both himself and Matthew into their circle to help them through those most difficult moments.

Teenagers being who they are, Matthew had made life even harder on everyone around him as he dealt with the huge hole left in his heart by the passing of his mother. All while also dealing with the trials of puberty and raging hormones. He had started acting out at school and had stopped attending church with his dad. Matthew often didn't come home until late at night with the

simple excuse that he had been hanging with friends. Too many times, Chuck was called to school because Matthew had acted up in class or had gotten into a fight on the school grounds.

Chuck didn't know what to do since Matthew wouldn't listen to him. So, Chuck had gotten his minister friends involved and they were glad to help. Father Thomas started taking Matthew on the occasional fishing trip. Bob Stillwell over at the Methodist Church met up with Matthew once a week to play basketball at the park. Jacob Porter from the Baptist Church encouraged Matthew to join a group of high school kids on Thursday nights for Bible Study. And while Matthew did seem to engage at times, there were many other times that he failed to show up.

The pastors met for breakfast once a week on Thursday at Daisy's Diner, and they all shared what was going on with their churches. Somehow the discussion always turned to Matthew and how he was struggling. They prayed together for the boy and Chuck was so very grateful.

Still, nothing seemed to help. As soon as he turned eighteen, not even waiting to graduate, Matthew packed up the old Plymouth that his dad had gotten for him on his sixteenth birthday. Chuck had thought that it might help fill the void that Matthew found himself struggling in. The boy had loved his mother and Chuck could only guess that Matthew blamed him for his mother's death; that his dad should have tried harder, prayed harder, worked harder, and done whatever it took to save her. And when his mother passed, his world collapsed. God didn't save his mother. His dad didn't save his mother. The doctors didn't save his

mother. Nothing mattered any more. Without even saying goodbye to his dad, he headed west and never looked back.

It had been over two years since Matthew had left and a day never went by that Chuck didn't wake up thinking about where his son might be. Every day Chuck covered his son in prayer. Every Thursday, Matthew was still the main subject of the pastor's prayer breakfast. Chuck tried not to let it affect his work, but there is just something about not knowing where your son was is how he is doing. And yes, in spite of his close relationship with his gracious and merciful Creator, the Reverend Charles Mallory felt depressed and alone. Trying to not worry didn't seem to help, and as many times as he laid the burden of worry at the foot of the cross, he found himself picking it back up again, trying to carry the burden all by himself.

Sitting at his desk working on his Sunday sermon, Chuck realized that he had allowed his mind to wander once again to thoughts of his son. Shaking the cobwebs from his head, he said another prayer for the safety and eventual return of his boy, then returned to writing his sermon.

He reread the paragraph that he had been working on and realized that it was total gibberish. Pain and depression can do that when one is trying to work while their mind is distracted by other things. He deleted the entire paragraph. There was nothing there to be salvaged. This message was supposed to be about letting go and letting God handle our problems. And yet he, as a pastor, was not doing a very good job exemplifying that for his flock. How could he teach

his parishioners this lesson when he himself had been so lax with his own follow through?

He read through the scripture he was working with again. Psalm 55:22

**“Cast your cares on the Lord**

**and he will sustain you;**

**he will never let**

**the righteous be shaken.”**

Why did he have such a problem with this?

A tear formed in his eye, but he didn't know if it was from the worry for his son or his own desire for repentance for not allowing God to handle his burden. Once again, he prayed. And once again he laid his anxiety, remorse, and lack of trust at the foot of the Cross.

And The phone rang, pulling him from his prayer. It was the same number that had called before that he hadn't recognized and had not left him a message. He swiped right to answer but no one said anything. Trying not to mumble, Chuck cleared his throat and said, “This is Reverend Chuck at First Community Church.” His voice was gravelly, and he cleared his throat again. “How can I help you?”

It was obvious that someone was on the other end of the line because Chuck could hear background noise. It sounded like passing trucks on a highway.

**“Hello?” Chuck asked again.**

**After a long pause, a soft voice spoke to him. “Dad? Dad? If it is okay with you, I’d like to come home. Please dad, I know I messed up, but I would really, really like to come home.”**

**Chuck’s mouth went dry, and he had a difficult time answering. He felt he was going to lose it. “Matthew? Son? Of course you can come home. Where are you? Do you need me to come get you?”**

**The door to Chuck’s office opened and Matthew, obviously road weary, stepped through, backpack in hand. Chuck leapt from chair and rushed to embrace his son who eagerly hugged him back. His son had come home! And now that Matthew was home, Chuck never wanted to let him go.**

**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.**

The one constant theme running throughout the Bible, is God's greatest Creation, humankind, constantly leaving home, a dwelling place with The Almighty God, to wander the earth in search of something better. Only to find that there is nothing better. And all the while, God calling out to his children that they are always welcome back home. "Return to me," he whispers insistently, tears in his eyes. "Come back. Your home is with me. Just tell me you are sorry and come home. I love you."

From Adam and Eve in the garden, to Abraham, to Moses, to Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. From David, to Joel, to Amos, to Nehemiah, to Obadiah and Jonah. From the disciples, to Paul, to the story of the Prodigal Son. To Jesus, who lit the way back and provided the redemption. Everywhere you turn in the Bible you here the same message in some way, "Turn around. Come back. Your home is with me. Just tell me you are sorry and come home. I love you."

It is important to put the words from our scripture in context, simply because they are often quoted without any context, and I don't want to misrepresent what is happening here. II Chronicles 7:11-16 gives us context that we need.

**11 When Solomon had finished the temple of the Lord and the royal palace, and had succeeded in carrying out all he had in mind to do in the temple of the Lord and in his own palace,**

**12 the Lord appeared to him at night and said:**

**“I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices.**

**13 “When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people,**

**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.**

**15 Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.**

**16 I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my Name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.**

**Solomon had just finished building the temple of the Lord, and God appears to him to tell him these things. “You did a good job building this temple like I asked you to do. I choose this place as sanctified ground where you can offer sacrifices. And when calamity of any sort comes:**

**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.**

Basically, If we wander away from God, and we humble ourselves and pray, and cry out to him, repent of our sins and embrace his forgiveness, he will show us the way home to his welcoming arms. He will bring us back into covenant, even though the breaking of the covenant was all our fault to begin with. Very much like a parent and child. We wandered away. We let him know that we now want to come home. We've learned our lesson. We ask for forgiveness. And God puts out the welcome mat and opens his arms wide. He will even come and search for us to bring us home.

This is a realignment of souls. God's soul and our souls. But too many of us force our own interpretation on this passage of scripture. We want to make it external rather than internal. "If we could only get everyone else to humble themselves, turn from their evil ways, and repent, then God would bless us. He would bring order to the chaos. He would right the wrongs of this world. He would bring the peace that satisfies us." Let's get everyone else to be humble. This is their problem, not my problem. They are the ones messing up. If they would only do what they are supposed to, then we would all be okay.

God never refers to other people here. "If MY people." Not, if those other people. This is personal. It's not about what everybody else is doing or how they are behaving. "IF MY PEOPLE, WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME."

The explicit implication here is for the Jews, but this grouping of people became expanded in the New Testament when Paul and other missionaries

embraced the gentile community, and we were brought into the fold through the blood and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We became a part of the family of God, joined in heart and soul.

Paul writes to the Galatians:

**There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.**

“If My people, who are called by My Name.” That includes us. Through the death and resurrection of our Savior, we are brought into communion with our Creator and the promise now includes us. But the provisions are also upon us.

**“will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways”**

Again, I say, this is personal. It is us that need to be humble. It is us that need to seek the face of God. It is us that that needs to turn from our wicked ways. It’s not about Russians, Americans, or Chinese. It is not about race, color or creed. It is not about denominations or religions. It is not about political platforms and agendas. It is not about sexual identities or financial status. It is not about our immigration status or any of our other of the ism’s that we are associated with. It is not about pointing fingers or shifting the blame. If we claim to be God’s people, then it is God’s banner we fly. And it is under that banner, the banner of God’s name that we gather to welcome his promise.

Do we believe that God can and will heal our land? Then we should not try to make it about someone else. If WE humble ourselves. If WE pray. If We seek

**God's face. If WE repent. If WE turn from our wicked ways, then God promises to heal our land. We cannot expect God to keep his promise if we are unable or unwilling to own up to what it means to be a child of God, and approach him with our own hearts, humbled that our Creator and Redeemer would hear our petition.**

**It is not up to us to change anyone else's heart. Our responsibility lies with our own hearts. God provides us with the means and opportunities to share the gospel with others, but we can't save anyone. Relationships with God are personal and tied to self-assessment. It takes looking in the mirror to see if we are being who God needs us to be and where we are falling short. The people we encounter may point out our flaws and our shortcomings, but it is up to us to hold those thoughts up to God to determine if HE thinks they need to be changed.**

**Once we clothe ourselves in the righteousness of our Creator and claim his name, we are no longer tied to our own image, but to his. Whatever we say and do is a reflection of him. He guides our steps. He helps us with our choices. He teaches us his ways. He lets us know when we succeed and helps us adjust when we fail. And the amount of change that occurs in us is more about the amount of work we are willing to put in rather than the amount of work we expect from him or other people.**

**That's what I would like for all of us to think about this week. Are we committed to being the child that God wants us to be? Are we willing to do the work that is required when we step under the banner of his name? Are we the reflection of Christ in a world that doesn't appreciate that reflection?**

**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.**

**God bless you all!**

**AMEN**

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