

RESTORING GRACE
Good News About Grace - Part 7 of 10
Lamentations 5:21 (NLT)
Rick Warren

*"Restore us, O Lord, and bring us back to You again!
Give us back the joys we once had!" Lamentations 5:21 (NLT)*

I. WHAT CAUSES BELIEVERS TO FALL AWAY?

Peter's Denial of Christ - Mark 14:27-72

1. _____
"Everyone else may stumble in their faith, but I will not!" vs. 29
2. _____
"Couldn't you stay awake with Me for one hour?" vs. 37
3. _____
"Peter followed Him at a distance..." vs. 54a
4. _____
"Then he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire." vs. 54b

GOD'S RESPONSE:

"There is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus."
Romans 8:1 (NLT)

II. WHY DOESN'T GOD REJECT BELIEVERS WHEN WE SIN?

1. **BECAUSE HIS LOVE** _____
"God's compassion never ends. It is only His mercies that have kept us from complete destruction." Lam. 3:22 (LB)
2. **BECAUSE SALVATION ISN'T BASED ON** _____
"He saved us, not because of the good things we did, but because of His mercy." Titus 3:5 (NLT)
3. **BECAUSE JESUS HAS ALREADY** _____
"When Jesus served as a sacrifice for our sins, He solved the sin problem for God -- not only ours, but the whole world's." 1 John 2:2 (Mes)

4. BECAUSE JESUS UNDERSTANDS _____

"(He) understands our weaknesses, for He faced all of the same temptations we do, yet He did not sin." Heb. 4:15 (NLT)

5. BECAUSE GOD DOESN'T _____

"God will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry forever. He has not punished us for all our sins, nor does He deal with us as we deserve ... He is like a father to His children, tender and compassionate to those who fear Him." Ps. 103:9-13 (NLT)

*"Come back to Me, you faithful children, and I will forgive you for being unfaithful."
Jer. 3:22 (NCV)*

III. WHAT SHOULD I DO WHEN I SIN? _____

"If you return to Me, I will restore you so you can continue to serve Me." Jer. 15:19 (NLT)

"No matter how deep the stain of your sins, I can take it out and make you clean as freshly fallen snow." Isa. 1:18 (LB)

"With great compassion I will take you back." Isa. 54:7 (LB)

*"Restore to me again the joy of your salvation."
Ps. 51:12 (NLT)*

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Your relationship to Jesus Christ is like any other relationship. It has to be maintained. No relationship ever stays the same. You're either growing closer to the Lord or you're drifting away. You never just stand still. You don't just become a Christian and that's it. You're either having your heart grow warmer every day or it's growing colder.

We've all known Christians who are no longer walking with the Lord. They've fallen away. At one point their hearts were warm and on fire for God but today they're no where to be found. We all know the struggles in our own heart. We face temptations. We face ups and downs, days when we think, "I don't know if I want to be a Christian today."

The good news is that God offers to us Restoring Grace. When we blow it, when we walk away, when we stumble, when we fumble, God says, "You can come back to Me." We can pray the prayer that was prayed in Lamentations 5:21, *"Restore us, O Lord, and bring us back to You again. Give us back the joys we once had."*

That's what I want to talk about this morning. How do you get the joy back in your Christian life? You may have been a believer for months, years, even decades but it may have gone a little stale in your life. Maybe you're just not as close to the Lord as you used to be. How do you get the joy back?

First, I want to identify four common causes of why people fall away from the Lord. There are many reasons why people may backslide, that they're not walking with God any more.

In Mark 14 the Bible tells us the story of Peter, one of the disciples, and His denial of Jesus on the night Jesus was betrayed and arrested. In that story, we have an example of four common causes of why people fall away.

You know the story. Jesus had been in the upper room with His twelve disciples. They had had the passover together which He turned into the Lord's Supper. Then He shocked all of the disciples by announcing, "One of you is going to betray Me." This shocked everybody. One of the twelve was going to be the guy who turned Jesus in? A traitor? They all began to say, "Lord, is it me? Is it I? Did I do it?" Peter, in his typical foot-in-mouth, braggadocious way, says, *"Everybody else may stumble in their faith but I will not."* You can almost hear the swagger in his voice. "All these peons, Lord, sure. They may cop out, but not me. I would never deny You."

1. This is the first reason people backslide -- **OVER CONFIDENCE.**

We begin to think we can handle everything on our own. We begin to think we are so strong we could never fail. We begin to say, "That would never happen to me!" Anytime you hear about somebody else's stumbling and you say, "That could never happen to me" you're sitting yourself up for a fall. Given the right situation, any of us in this room, is capable of any sin. The Bible

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says, *"The heart is deceitful."* That means we lie to ourselves as much as lying to others. I can't even figure out why I do what I do, much less figure out why you do what you do. We don't always know why we do what we do. You should never say, "I could never fall for that." That's called overconfidence and that's the first step in falling away.

1 Corinthians 10:12 says if you think you're strong be careful because you'll fall. *"Let him who standeth take heed lest he fall."* It's a trap.

Proverbs 16:18 says a proud attitude leads to ruin. *"Pride goes before destruction. A haughty spirit before a fall."*

The way you spell ego -- EGO stands for Edging God Out. When I get overconfident, I let ego into my life, I'm edging God out and I'm already backing away and heading down the slippery slope of falling away from Christ.

2. The second cause of falling away is **LAZINESS**. We see this too in the story of Peter's denial. We get lethargic and kind of slack off. All these good habits we used to do like praying every day, reading the Bible every day, being in a small group we start saying, "Maybe I don't have time for that right now."

When you do, it ought to be a warning light. Because in the next scene we see this happening to Peter. He just got tired. Jesus took Peter, James and John -- three of the disciples -- into the Garden and said, "I want you guys to stay here and pray with Me for a while." This was the night He knew He was going to be arrested and the next day He would be executed, crucified. He said, "Can you guys just be with Me -- watch and pray." He goes off and prays a little bit and comes back and they're asleep. He goes off and comes back again and they've fallen asleep again. Peter's problem was he just kept falling asleep. Jesus says in v. 37 *"Couldn't you stay awake with Me for one hour?"*

There's a principle here. When you get tired, you're sitting yourself up for major temptation.

It's more difficult to do the right thing than it is to do the wrong thing. It's easy to do the wrong thing, it's often the easiest. If you really want to do the right thing in life, it takes energy, it takes effort, it takes a lot of stamina. Because you're trying to do the right thing all the time, you're going to get tired -- emotionally, physically, spiritually, in every area of your life. If you don't know how to recharge yourself emotionally, if you don't know how to recharge yourself spiritually or physically, then fatigue is going to set in. And fatigue should always be a warning light that something's going wrong, something's out of order. When you're tired, that's when you're most vulnerable to temptation.

I've talked to a lot of people -- Christians -- who've stumbled in major ways in their life. And it always seems to be during a time of great stress, when they were very tired, and they were ignoring all the warning lights. They didn't know when to take time off, they didn't know when to double up their effort in prayer, they didn't know when to get back in the Bible to a greater degree. They set themselves up because they get tired. Fatigue lowers your defenses and it makes you vulnerable.

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Matthew 6:41 Jesus said, "*Watch and pray so you won't fall into temptation.*" We've got to keep our guard up because when we start letting it down in laziness, we're starting on the slippery slope to falling away.

3. The third cause of falling away from Christ is **FEAR OF DISAPPROVAL**. We're worried about what other people will think. We're afraid they'll reject us, they won't accept us, that they'll make fun of us or ridicule us or put us down or that we might be harassed.

This is what happened to Peter. After Jesus was arrested it says in Mark 15:54 "*Peter followed Him at a distance.*" Get the picture. Jesus has been arrested and Peter decided he would follow Him at a distance. Just far enough back so that nobody would identify him with Jesus.

Do you ever try to follow Jesus at a distance? "I'm a follower of Christ but let's not get fanatical about it! Let's not get radical. I don't want to be red hot for God. Somebody might think I'm a nut case. I believe in Jesus, yes. But I want to follow Him at a distance." It's like the old statement: If all of a sudden they outlawed Christianity and they made it illegal and you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Would your neighbors know you were Christian or that you're always gone on Sunday morning but they don't know why?

One of the signs that you can know that you're slipping away from Christ is you start to become ashamed of Him. You want to follow Him at a distance. You're ashamed maybe to put your Bible on your desk at work. You're ashamed to pray over a meal in a restaurant in public. What would people think? They might think you're a believer. You're ashamed to be seen with a group of other Christians. Or you're ashamed to even be known as a Christian. So you try to keep it a secret.

I just wrote an endorsement for a new book written by my good friend Hugh Huet. It's called The Embarrassed Christian. That's an epidemic in America today. We've let the media so pound us down nobody wants to stand up. Nobody wants to speak up.

Proverbs 29:25 "*Fearing people is a dangerous trap.*" When you start worrying about what other people think, you're headed for trouble. It's a snare and it's going to catch you.

Mark 8:38 Jesus said, "*If anyone is ashamed of Me and My words I will be ashamed of him before the holy angels and My father in heaven.*" Jesus said, "If you're ashamed of Me here on earth, I will be ashamed of you in heaven." That's powerful stuff. There are no secret agents in God's army, no closet Christians. It's time to come out of the closet. A lot of Christians can talk about anything except Jesus. They're what I call Arctic River Christians -- frozen at the mouth.

Revelation 21:8 lists cowardice in the same category in the same as murder and adultery. That's how serious it is to be embarrassed. And when you're worried about the disapproval of others you're on the slippery slope of falling away.

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4. **CONVENIENCE.** We want to have a faith but we want to have a comfortable faith. We want it to fit our schedule. Sure I want to follow Christ as long as it doesn't cramp my style.

Look what happened to Peter. It says he followed Jesus from a distance. *"Then he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire."* This is an amazing scene to me. One of the twelve, one of the original disciples, Jesus is about to be executed and Peter is partying with the enemy. He's sitting there in the crowd wanting to be one of the gang, warming his arms by the fire. The very men who were going to torture and execute Christ, he's there sitting around a campfire with them. Hanging out, wanting to be comfortable. "I want to enjoy life. I don't want to be cold. I want to be warm. I want to be accepted. I want to be a part of the gang. I just want to be one of the boys. I want to follow Christ when it's convenient. But if it's not convenient, forget it. I'm going to go back and hang out with the guys."

If you try to enjoy the world's campfire, you're going to get burned. You're not in the same kingdom, the same world, the lifestyle any more.

I've been in ministry now for over 25 years and I've seen it all. I've watched a lot of people flame out, a lot of people sidelined. People who had big talk but nothing to back it up. People who were supposedly strong Christians and today they can't be found anywhere. Even in this church in 18 years I've seen this parade of short term disciples who walk with Christ as long as it's convenient. Then they start to fall away. I've noticed a pattern when people fall away from Christ. It is the same pattern. I've seen it hundreds and hundreds of time. It always starts like this:

When a person's real active in a church and they start falling away the first thing they stop is their giving. I've seen it hundreds of times. The first thing they stop is their giving. Jesus said your giving indicates your heart. He said where your treasure is your heart will be. It's a thermometer. A good EKG of your heart. How's your giving? Always giving is the first thing that stops. It says I'm getting into the world's way.

The second thing that stops is prayer. They stop praying.

The third thing is they stop attending.

What happens to those people? What happens to a person who's a genuine Christian, who's committed their life to Christ, but for one reason or another they've backslidden, fallen away. They're not walking with the Lord any more.

How does God respond to those kind of people? When a Christian sins, does he lose his salvation? When a Christian sins, does he go to hell? How does God respond?

He responds the way He always responds to His children. By grace. Romans 8:1 *"There is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus."* Circle "no". That word "no" is the strongest possible negative in the Greek language. It means "No, No... Never, Never... Not in a million years!" There's no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. This is not a promise for everybody. It's not saying anybody can do whatever they want to do and there's no

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condemnation. It says for those who are in Christ Jesus. If you are a genuine believer in Christ, you've put your trust in Christ, accepted His grace, there is no condemnation.

What does that mean? It means you don't lose your salvation when you sin. Aren't you glad for that? If you could lose your salvation every time you sin you'd lose it about once a minute. Let's say you lived for Jesus Christ your entire life and five minutes before you die you blow it, you go to hell. You would live in fear your entire life. If you felt that fear, you need to read the book of 1 John about fifteen times because it's written to say "So you can know for sure that you have eternal life." If you were saved by your works, you could lose it if you stopped working. But you're not saved that way. It says, There is no condemnation when a Christian sins.

Notice it does not say there are no consequences. It says no condemnation. There are a lot of consequences. When I get out of God's will for my life, when I blow it, when I intentionally don't do what God wants me to do, when I ignore His will there are major consequences. Same thing for you too. Every time you disobey God, every time you ignore His will, every time you don't follow His instruction you lose. You hurt yourself and you hurt other people. You lose big time. When a Christian sins, what happens? You lose your fellowship with Christ. You lose your effectiveness on earth. You lose rewards in heaven. You lose your joy here on earth. The miserable people on earth are not unbelievers but believers who know better and acting like unbelievers. But you do not lose your salvation. Why? Why doesn't God just kick us out when we blow it? "You had your chance! You knew better. You blew it. You're out of the family."

WHY DOESN'T GOD REJECT BELIEVERS WHEN WE SIN?

For five reasons. This is what grace is all about.

1. Because His love is unconditional.

God doesn't say, "I love you if..." you're good, perfect, whatever. He doesn't say, "I love you because..." He just says, "I love you ... period!" Some of you need to write this down: God will never stop loving me. God will never stop loving me because I am a recipient of His grace.

Lamentations 3:22 *"God's compassion never ends. It is only His mercies that have kept us from complete destruction."* Circle "never". God's compassion never ends. God does not reject believers when we sin because His love is unconditional.

2. Because my salvation isn't based on my performance.

God doesn't reject believers when they sin because my salvation isn't based on my performance. Romans 9:16 says *"It doesn't depend on man's desire or effort but on God's mercy."* We covered this in detail in the very first message in this series on Saving Grace. I'll say it again: The only way you ever have any hope of getting into heaven is by the grace of God. You can't earn your way into heaven, buy your way to Heaven, work your way to heaven, bluff your way to heaven, whatever. If you don't get saved by grace, you're not getting saved. If you don't get into heaven

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on the grace of Jesus Christ, you're not going to get there. It's perfect and you're not. It's the only way.

Titus 3:5 *"He saved us, not because of the good things we did, but because of His mercy."* God doesn't reject me as a believer when I sin because His love is unconditional and my salvation isn't based on my performance.

3. Because Jesus has already taken my punishment.

God doesn't reject me when I sin because Jesus has already taken my punishment if I've accepted that as a believer. In America we have a law called the law of double jeopardy. The law of double jeopardy says you cannot be tried for the same crime twice. You cannot be convicted for the same crime twice. You cannot be punished for the same crime twice. That's true in God's book too. People are not punished for the same crime, or the same sin, twice.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus stretched His arms out on the cross and took the punishment for my sin and for yours. He took it all. He paid the price for you. He took your rap. He served your term. He took the death penalty for you. *"The wages for sin is death..."* and He died for you.

What sins did He die for? All of them. The ones in your future that you don't even know about yet, He died for those too. They've already been punished. The sins you've done in the past and the ones you're going to do in the future, somebody's already taken the punishment for them. Jesus Christ. That's why He cried out on the cross, *"It is finished."* Paid in full.

Can you imagine God coming to you the next time you sin and He said, "By the way, what Jesus did for you? It wasn't good enough. I'm going to punish you too." Doesn't make sense, does it? That's double jeopardy. If God punished you it would be saying that what Jesus did wasn't good enough. But it was.

I don't know how to say it any clearer than this. If you are a Christian and you've received the grace of God, God does not punish you when you sin. That punishment was already taken by Jesus on the cross.

I know what some people are thinking. "Jesus has already been punished for all the things I'm going to do?" Yes. "That means some people would do whatever they want. All my sins have already been punished and paid for and I can go out and go to bed with anybody I want to go to bed with. I can cheat on my income tax. I can lie. I can steal. I can do whatever I want to do. It's already been punished. I'm not going to pay the punishment for it."

If you feel that way, if you think that thought, you are not a genuine believer in Jesus Christ. No real genuine believer would ever pervert the grace of God, flaunt it, abuse it in such a way. Grace makes me want to do what is right. Grace is not a license: "I know I'm all forgiven. I'll go ahead and keep on doing whatever I want to. I'm forgiven, therefore I'll keep having this affair. I know

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I'm forgiven. Therefore I'll just go ahead and leave my family. I'm forgiven. I'll do what I want to do."

That is an abuse of grace. No genuine believer would flaunt the grace of God like that in the face of God. Grace makes me want to do what's right. When I really understand grace, I say, "God, I am so grateful. You're telling me that everything I'm ever going to do wrong is already taken care of?" Yes. "I am so grateful for that. I want to serve You the rest of my life. I want to love You. I want to do whatever You made me to do in this world."

Besides, while God does not condemn you, God does not punish you, you will be disciplined. What is that? Discipline is very different than punishment. Punishment is retribution for the past. Discipline is correction for the future. Punishment is done in anger. Discipline is done in love. Punishment is to say, "This is what you get for what you did!" Discipline says, "I want to train you to get you on the right path for the future."

The Bible says if you continually sin and sin and you're not disciplined it means you're not in God's family. I don't go next door and discipline the kids next door. They're not in my family. But I discipline my own kids. They're in my family. One of the ways you know you're a Christian is you can't sin and get away with it. God brings discipline in your life to correct you.

I've written a pamphlet: "Living without Condemnation". It's based on today's message. It explains how does God respond when I sin, what happens when a Christian sins, what doesn't happen, the difference between punishment and discipline and what to do to get back in line. It'll give you a little bit greater explanation of what we're talking about here.

Notice what the Bible says. 1 John 2:2 *"When Jesus served as a sacrifice for our sins, He solved the sin problem for God, not only ours, but the whole world's."* He solved it right there. So God doesn't reject me when I sin. Because Jesus has already taken the punishment.

4. Because Jesus understands my human weaknesses.

He's sympathetic. He's understanding. He knows my frailties, my faults. He knows what makes me tick. He knows how I'm wired. One of the most beautiful truths you're going to need to learn in the Christian life is this: God is patient with you. He just doesn't get impatient.

Hebrews 4:15 *"He understands our weaknesses, for He faced all of the same temptations we do, yet He did not sin."* When Jesus Christ was here on the earth, He experienced every temptation known to man. He says, I understand what you are. I understand what it's like to be a human being because I lived in human flesh for 33 years. So He's sympathetic. He understands your weaknesses. He knows what you're going through. He knows what it's like to be tempted. He's sympathetic.

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5. Because God doesn't hold on to grudges.

Psalms 103 says this in the New Living Translation *"God will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry forever. He has not punished us for all our sins, nor does He deal with us as we deserve. He is like a father to His children, tender and compassionate to those who fear Him."* Those who fear Him -- that means those who respect Him, those who've trusted in Him, those who committed to Him, those who are in His family. This is the benefit of being a believer. God doesn't hold a grudge toward me. If you are a believer, God is not angry with you. Why? All of the punishment was taken on the cross.

You may be thinking, "You don't know how far I've fallen. You don't know what I've done." No, I don't. But God does. You may think you've strayed too far away. If you've strayed far away from God, either by one giant step like having an affair, or a bunch of little small steps where you kind of slacked off in your Christian commitment, this is what God says to you: (Jeremiah 3:22) *"Come back to Me, you unfaithful children, and I will forgive you for being unfaithful."*

A beautiful example of that is our testimony by Randy Warren, not my brother.

Randy:

My name is Randy Warren and I'd like to share how God and His grace brought me back after I'd turned my back and wandered away from Him for several years.

I committed my life to Christ eight years ago in May of 1990 in Idaho Falls, Idaho. A friend of mine from work named Jeff was responsible for introducing me to Christ. I tried to change the subject but he never gave up. One day he invited me to a Christian concert and it was there that I gave my heart to Jesus. After I was saved I got involved in a local church. It was a small church with only about twenty members. But I jumped head first into the Bible. I studied it on my own and also in group Bible study. For the next six months I continued to grow in Christ. I served in our small church by setting it up and taking it down on weekends and doing the many things that a church needs done week to week. But being a young Christian I had a lot to learn. I thought that now that I was a Christian, I'd never have any problems any more and things would go just as I planned. In fact, I expected God to do things my way.

I was a student in the Navy learning to operate nuclear power plants for submarines. I'd been selected to stay after my classes' graduation to become an instructor. I was sure that this was God's plan for me. But then I failed my final evaluation and was rejected for instructor duty. This was a major blow to me. I felt that God had let me down and I had my first doubts. But my church family supported me and I felt like I could handle this disappointment.

Instead of becoming a teacher I was assigned to a nuclear powered fast attack submarine in Bangor, Washington. It was in overhaul at the time so my life of relatively easy hours as a student changed radically. We typically worked 12-16 hours a day for weeks at a time. It was really hard work and the more tired I got the more frustrated I became. I grew increasingly bitter and resentful as time passed. I started to think that God had given up on

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me. This was a big mistake. As a result I began to spend less and less time with God. Instead I started trying to solve all my problems myself. Of course this did not work and my frustration increased. As the stress built up I started to do what I saw everyone else in the sub doing to relax -- drink. I drank like a fish. I can still remember racing from work to Denney's across town to get there before last call. I would order three or four drinks at once.

But turning away from Jesus was not a quick, one time event. It was a slow, day by day erosion of my faith. I let my guard down. The more I turned away from God the more I continued to get deeper into sin. Sadly I went from a man who was saving himself for his wife as God intended a man to do to a man who lost his virginity to a prostitute. I was in sad shape for being a Christian. By the time our boat left overhaul, God was the last thing on my mind.

After our sub was overhauled, we went to sea. At sea, I found even more opportunities to stray farther from God. The stress of living and working in a confined space, the peer pressure and the race to have as much fun as possible when in port pushed me farther and farther from Jesus. I fell so far away that I even started challenging and attacking other Christians for their faith. I would ridicule them and attack their knowledge of the Bible. I would even go to lay pastor's services and attack their beliefs. Looking back, I can see how all my actions were motivated by guilt, shame and bitterness. Since I was running from God like Jonah, I didn't want anyone reminding me what I turned my back on.

Of course nothing I did could bring me any happiness. The further I got from God the more bitter I became. My family relationships also suffered. Anyone in my family that didn't agree with me, I would just stop calling them. In my backslidden condition, I wasn't close to them or anyone else. Whenever I dated women, I treated them badly. I would only call them when I wanted something for myself. When I was done with them, I would dump them or reject them until they would leave me.

But even during the lowest of these times, God never gave up on me. Even without me realizing it, He was working in my life to bring me back to Him. The tool God chose to use in my life was a woman that I became interested in. Her name was Annita and I met her during a group dinner with a large group of guys and their wives. We hit it off and started seeing each other. After a few weeks, I slipped into my familiar pattern of trying to come up with a way for her to reject me so I could move on.

One of the all time stupid stunts I pulled. I went on vacation for two weeks and telling Annita specifically to pick me up at the airport. But instead I stayed an extra two weeks and never called her. When I did return, I fully expected her to dump me. To my complete surprise, Annita held me accountable for my action. She even made me talk it out. I couldn't believe it. I was so amazed that someone would actually care enough to do that. I decide that night I'd better marry her. I took her to Sunset Cliffs in San Diego and asked her to marry me. I had to ask her twice but she finally said yes and we were married.

Shortly after that I got out of the navy and we moved to Tustin. Annita's friends at work told her about a church called Saddleback. Of course, I wasn't interested at all. My wife kept

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trying to get me to go. I finally went just to make her happy. The last place I wanted to be was in God's house. But we went and I liked it enough to come back. I told myself it was just for her. When I began to hear God's word and be around genuine Christians, God was able to slowly soften my heart. Finally one night after one of Pastor Rick's sermons I found myself setting on the floor of my bedroom and God opened my eyes. I realized that although I had moved away from God, He never moved away from me. I saw that even though I'd turned my back on Him, He was still there waiting for me to return to Him. More than that, He had put the people and circumstances in my life to show me that He still loved me as much as He ever had even though I had been a jerk.

When I finally saw the great blessings in my life for what they were, I broke down and prayed right then and there and rededicated my life to Jesus. It was so incredible to feel His love in my heart again. I wondered why it had taken me so long to return to Him. There's a verse in the Bible, Romans 2:4, that says, The goodness of God leads to repentance. That's certainly true in my life. It wasn't a crisis or tragedy or bankruptcy or divorce that God had used to get my attention. It was the simple realization that God had blessed my life so much, even when I was turning my back on Him, and even though I didn't deserve it. That's grace. It was seeing God's undeserved goodness in my life that brought me back to Him.

Since I've come back to fellowship with Christ, I realized even more how much God has blessed me. First, I have a greater appreciation for my wife that I didn't have before. I'm so grateful that she never gave up praying for me. If you have a spouse that has wandered away from God, don't give up on them. Next, I'm grateful for the wonderful church family that Annita and I have here at Saddleback. The church is a gift of grace that God has given to help us grow in Him together. We were happy to take CLASS 101 and were baptized together as Christians. Then we took CLASSES 201 and 301. Now I'm grateful that God has given me a new ministry and a place to serve Him. When I think of all that God has done for me, I want to give back to Him. I'm now serving in Adventure Land teaching 3rd graders on Saturday evening. God has also blessed me by being a part of a great men's group and couples small group.

Because I turned away from God's plan for my life and sinned there were scars and hurtful consequences for my actions. But God was not waiting for me to come back just so He could condemn me and tell me all the things I'd done wrong. Instead, what I found when I returned to Him was open arms, a loving smile and the power to help me face my mistakes and the strength to overcome them.

In closing, I'd like to say if you're a Christian who's not as close to Christ as you used to be, I urge you to come back to Him today. No matter how far you've fallen or run away from Christ, you are only one step away from returning to Him. All you have to do is turn around and return to His love. His grace is really amazing.

You may be thinking, "I've gone so far down the slope there's no way back. It's just going to take too much effort, too much energy. It's too long. I've gone too far away." You're wrong. Very wrong. I like what Randy said, "No matter how far you've run away it's only one step back." It's

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not this long, drawn out, complex process that's going to take years for you to get back in fellowship with God. It's just one step.

Many people do not understand the difference between fellowship and relationship. Fellowship is your current status. Relationship is your permanent position.

Can I be out of fellowship with my wife and still be married to her? Of course I can. Can a child be out of fellowship with his or her parents and yet still be their child? Of course. When you sin you don't lose the relationship. You lose the fellowship. Those of you who are parents and as much as you try to raise your children in the right way, when they get older they're going to make their own decisions. I hope this doesn't happen but you might have a child that does the very thing you despise the most. You might even have a child who one day, in a fit of anger, publicly disowns you and disavows you as a parent. You might even have a child who, when they get older, never even talks to you. But nothing will ever change the fact that they're your child. Nothing will ever change that. The fellowship is damaged but the relationship will always be there. Because they were born into your family and they cannot be unborn.

When you became a believer in Christ, you were born again into God's family and you cannot be unborn. So, although the fellowship with God has been broken, the relationship is still there. You're only one step away from returning.

What should I do when I sin? One word: Return! Come back to Christ. It's that simple. I blew it and I'm back.

Jeremiah 15:19 *"If you return to Me, I will restore you so you can continue to serve Me."*

No matter what you've done God says in Isaiah 1:18 -- I don't care what you've done, how far you've fallen, *"No matter how deep the stain of your sins, I can take it out and make you as clean as freshly fallen snow."* That ought to be the Clorox verse of the Bible. It doesn't matter what you've done. Isaiah 54:7, *"With great compassion I will take you back."*

There's a happy ending to the story of Peter's denial. If ever there was a sin you'd think was unforgivable, it's denying Jesus three times on the night He's betrayed. But Jesus knew Peter would deny Him and even knew he would come back to Him. In fact, before it even happened, Jesus said to Peter in the upper room, *"Satan has desired to sift you but I have prayed for you and when you have returned, strengthen the brothers."* He knew he would return.

The Bible says that Jesus prays for you. It says He's in heaven right now and *"He liveth to make intercession for the saints."* He is praying for you every day. If you could lose your salvation, Jesus' prayers don't work. It's impossible because He prays for you everyday to the Father.

Jesus said, "I know you're going to fall away Peter, but when you come back, strengthen the brothers." Jesus knew that Peter's ministry would be more effective after his denial than it was before. And sure enough it was. Peter wrote two of the books of the Bible called 1 and 2 Peter. Then he shared his memoirs with a relative and that's the Gospel of Mark.

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There are two poignant incidences in Peter's life that happened after his denial. The Bible tells us in the book of Mark 16:7 on Easter morning when the three women went to the tomb, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, the stone was rolled away and an angel was sitting on it. The angel said, He's not here. He's in heaven. *"Go tell His disciples and Peter."* Jesus knew that Peter was devastated by his denial. He was humiliated. He was ashamed. He was depressed. He thought he could never face Jesus Christ again for what he had done. Jesus threw in a special, personal recognition, *"Go tell His disciples and Peter."* It's as if He was saying, "It's ok, Peter. It's ok. All is forgiven. Come on home! All is forgiven." That is the grace of Jesus Christ. Come on home! It's ok. I haven't stopped loving you.

Later in John 21 in one of the many incidences where Jesus appeared to people after His resurrection. He's on the coast of the lake. Peter and the fishermen are out fishing. They see Jesus on the shore. Peter doesn't wait and dives in and swims to shore. Jesus has a little one on one conversation with Peter -- His first encounter to talk personally, privately. Jesus says to Peter, "Do you love Me?" Peter say, "You know, Lord, I love You." Jesus says, "Peter, do you really, really love Me?" Peter said a second time, "Lord, You know I love You." And Jesus said a third time, "Peter, do you really love Me." Peter said, "You know Lord, I love You."

What was going on? Jesus was giving Peter three times to affirm what he had denied three times. That is the grace of God. You may think God's forgotten you. He hasn't. The good shepherd leaves the 99 sheep to go after the one. He knows how you've fallen away. If you have -- either by one giant step some big hughmongous sin or a series of petty steps where you just slipped away and you're not as close to Christ as you used to be, you need to pray the prayer that David prayed when he came back to God. Psalm 51 David prayed after he committed adultery. He said, *"Restore to me again the joy of Your salvation."* Notice that David did not have to pray, "God, restore to me my salvation" because he hadn't lost it. He had lost the joy.

And some of you have too. Come home to Christ today.

Prayer:

I'd like to close with a time of personal evaluation and I want you to consider a few questions. Was there ever a time in your life when you were closer to Christ than you are right now? If so, what happened? Have you allowed the slippage? Why? What got in the way? A career? A relationship? A hobby? Television? Has your relationship to Christ gone stale? Are you just heartlessly going through the motions? Has duty replaced delight? Have you stopped caring about the salvation of those people around you? When was the last time you shared a positive word about Christ with a seeker? Have you been ashamed of your relationship to Christ? What is it that you know God wants you to do that you've been putting off and procrastinating? Being baptized? Joining the family here at Saddleback church? What is it that you used to do but you slacked off on? Reading your Bible? Tithing? Giving? It's just possible that that's why you lost your joy. Maybe you've committed something you think, "I'm so ashamed. I'm afraid to come back to full commitment to Christ." It's just one step back. As your pastor I want to pray for you.

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Father, I know that there are people here who have been fighting a civil war in their minds. They know the right thing to do but they've been fighting it. They wanted to do the convenient thing or the popular thing or the easy thing and now they've lost that spark and they're ashamed. There are others here filled with a deep regret for the things they've done. They've been afraid to return to You. Help them to experience the freedom of Restoring Grace in their life.

Pray, "Jesus, You know I've wandered away. My heart has started growing cold. My level of love and commitment to You is not like it used to be. But I want to thank You for Your unconditional love. I thank You that You've never stopped loving me. I really want to thank You that my salvation isn't based on my performance. Jesus, it's almost unbelievable but I thank You for taking all the punishment for my sins. I thank You, Jesus, that You understand and sympathize with my human weaknesses. I want to thank You that You don't hold onto grudges and that You're not angry with me. By grace, I ask You to take me back today. I come home to Your open loving arms. I want to follow You by grace. I come back home today."

If you've never invited Christ into your life, you really need the grace of God. You need to accept it today. Say, "Jesus Christ, I don't understand it all but I accept what You did for me, Your forgiveness, Your grace. I want to be a part of Your family. I want to follow You. In Your name I pray. Amen."