



Returning to God

The Big Picture / Story:

If we look at the big picture or the big story we can see the following: Satan wanted to sit on God's throne because of pride; Satan and a third of the angels that fell with him were kicked out of heaven; God created man and is well pleased with His creation; Satan is angry at God but of course he can not touch Him; so Satan does the next best thing which is go after those who God loves; and quickly man is deceived by Satan and sins. All of the above happens in the first three chapters of the Bible. The rest of the Bible and the rest of the story is simply God trying to restore man to Himself.

"Holy, Holy, Holy, truly O Lord, our God, Who formed us, created us and placed us in the paradise of joy. When we disobeyed Your commandment by the guile of the serpent, we fell from eternal life, and were exiled from the paradise of joy. You have not abandoned us to the end, but have always visited us through your holy prophets, and in the last days. You did manifest Yourself to us who were sitting in darkness and the shadow of death, through Your only begotten Son, our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ..."[from the divine liturgy of Saint Basil the Great]

The point is that we ought not feel boastful that we return to God. We ought only feel thankful that God continued to pursue us enough for us to respond to His knocking on our door. [13for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. (Phil. 2:13)]

The first and most important element of returning to God:

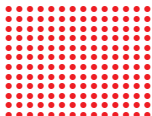
One might consider going to church regularly, fasting, praying, reading the bible... etc. as returning to God. This is not true. The Pharisees did all of the above and more. They even memorized at least the entire book of Leviticus and all of the psalms. But Jesus told them ["get away from me you liars, hypocrites, you're nothing but a brood of vipers..."(Matt12:33-35, Matt 23:27)]. In order for it to be a true returning to God, it has to be a returning of the heart. If the heart is true, all of the above will be natural consequences. [For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him (2Chron 16:9). A broken and a contrite heart-- These, O God, You will not despise.(Psa 51:17)].

One might use as an excuse for not returning to God is that it is hard and a lot of work, or that it is boring, or that they tried it but not much happened, etc.... Simply trying some practice or some action begrudgingly will not help anything, because the heart is not involved. [So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm. (Joel 2:13)].

Why is my heart turned away from God and what is the process of returning to God?

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The main reason one's heart is away from God or lacking enough love for God to walk with Him, is because something else (or more than one thing) is occupying this heart. ["Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts, and put before them that which causes them to stumble into iniquity. Should I let Myself be inquired of at all by them? (Ezk 14:3)]. It is up to me to find out what this thing is. [Let us search out and examine our ways, And turn back to the LORD; (Lamentations 3:40)].

The most important factor here is for one to be honest with themselves. [Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; ²⁴And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting. (Psa 139:23-24) Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. (Ps. 51:10)]. If I honestly seek it and ask God to search my heart and to show me what is it that is keeping me away from Him, He will answer.

["Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you (Matt 7:7)...

Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. ¹⁵And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him. (1 John 5:14-15). ...

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. (Rev 3:20)].



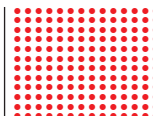
Just so that you don't think that there is one thing you will have to find out and fix and then you're done and set for life, just be prepared to know that this walk and this work will never end as long as you are alive. [But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. (²Cor 3:18)]. If you continuously seek to find out, what else you need to rid your heart of, God will continue to show you and step by step you will come closer and closer to God. [Whom will he teach knowledge? And whom will he make to understand the message? Those just weaned from milk? Those just drawn from the breasts? ¹⁰For precept must be upon precept,

Line upon line, Here a little, there a little." (Isa 28:9-10)].

If you imagine God being at one point on a road and you turning your back to Him and walking away from Him... The first step is turning back to face God again, what follows is walking back toward Him one step at a time. During your walk back to God, you will get distracted and you will fall... you might even turn your back yet again to a different direction away from God. What is crucial is that you keep your heart honest and true enough to continue to stand up and return to God and keep walking back toward Him once more. [Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. (Pro 4:23)]. That's why one cannot claim that they are returning to God and at the same time continue to fill their hearts with earthly or even evil distractions. The term "no Lord" cannot exist. If I believe and confess that He is Lord, then my response to Him and His prompting should always be "yes Lord"

What will happens when I honestly return to God?

Trusting in God with a little and getting rewarded with much. [¹⁷And he said to him, "Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities. (Luke 19:17)]. If one starts step by step, God will reward him or her and help them take big leaps [¹⁹The LORD God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer's feet, And He will make me walk on my high hills. (Hab 3:19)]. There are many examples of this like the boy trusting God with the two fish and five loaves and the miraculous blessing that came from that; or the widow that fed Elijah with her last bit of oil and flour and the marvelous reward that came from that, etc. God desires for us to have a very personal intimate relationship with Him and if we trust Him with our hearts a little, He is faithful to reward us with more spirituality, more love and more intimacy with Him, all we have to do is to honestly desire it and to return to Him and to start walking toward Him and trusting Him with a little. Of course we need to persevere, we can't "turn" to God and after a few weeks say to ourselves "well, I tried it and nothing happened... I did my share and no result, so I quit." If our heart is honest, we have to persevere and keep on keeping on and once we get a taste of who God is,



we will desire it more, try harder, walk closer and He will reward us even more.

Signs that we have our back turned away from God	Signs of our returning to God and that we are on the right track
It is very difficult to forgive people when they sin against us	Forgiveness is a little easier because we KNOW that God forgave us much more and that He is our advocate
When trials come, we panic, get very scared and possibly sin more, due to the trial	When trials come, even though we don't like them and / or we are distressed by them, we have this unexplainable peace
When sad times come, we are miserable maybe even lost	When sad times come, even though we are saddened, we have a stable undercurrent of joy, because we KNOW it is all in His hand and that His will be done.
Bible studies or liturgies or spiritual meetings feel like a punishment or are at the very least boring	Bible studies, liturgies and spiritual meetings are a treat, enjoyable and something that we look forward to
Finding ourselves in the company of people that are living or behaving in sin or watching improper movies or listening to improper music does not phase us and is possibly enjoyable	Finding ourselves in the company of people that are living or behaving in sin or watching improper movies or listening to improper music makes us feel uncomfortable and at a point where we cannot endure it.

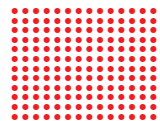
Word of caution:

One should not base their returning to God on the behavior of other people, not even leaders of the church. Humans sin, we always sin. Basing our model or our hope on any person other than Jesus Christ is very dangerous and will sooner or later lead to disappointment and potential falling away from God again. **[for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23)].**

Get ready! Returning to God will be faced with many fights:

If we know anything about the enemy, we know that he is relentless. If he dared to repeatedly attack the saints and to try to tempt them with various temptations and fights, he will definitely have no issue whatsoever to fight us, since we are such an easier target. Once we've made the determination to return to God and have started on our walk back toward Him, the attacks will increase in frequency and in difficulty. The enemy will try to hinder us and he will try to do whatever he can to make us go back to our old ways whether it be by giving bigger harder temptations, or by making our spiritual experiences especially difficult or unrewarding. When such occurs, we

should consider it a very good sign. When we are not being met with such fights, this means that we are heading in the right direction as far as the enemy is concerned. That's why we should prepare our hearts for these fights and temptations and that's why we should pray to God and ask Him to hold our hands and to protect us and guide us and if we can not walk toward Him that He may at least keep us standing firm during these trials. [Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand (Eph 6:13)].



Where do I start from here?

Start with what you have now and show God that you may be trusted with just a little. Not one day will pass without God trying to talk to you through the Holy Spirit. This typically occurs as a little thought in your mind that you should take a certain action. It might occur while you are reading the Bible, or when you are praying. It might also occur while you are walking, driving, shopping, working or interacting with others in general. You will hear a little "voice" inside you telling you to "say these encouraging words"; "go help this person"; "go apologize to that person, even though they're the one who is wrong"; "hold your tongue" even though you know you're right; "Stop, ask this person if they need help"; or maybe even something as small as "pick up this piece of trash and throw it in the garbage can." The examples are endless and they will be as variable as the situations you find yourself in daily. Also, the level of difficulty or level of trust in God required will slightly increase each time. Yet at the same time, there will always be a sense of great satisfaction, peace and joy, simply from the feeling that God has talked to you and you trusted and obeyed Him. These promptings are nothing but God talking to you through the Holy Spirit to get you closer to Him. The more you obey and respond, the more God will reward you with more intimacy with Him and sooner or later you will get to a level where you are almost in constant contact or constant communication with God.

"Come to me, all you who are weary
and burdened, and I will give you rest."



The other mistake we make is that we want to hear the voice of the Son of God with our physical ear, speaking a human language with the voice of a man! But the voice of the Son of God cannot be so limited. It is a power that moves the soul, raises it up, and refreshes it. It is a deep incomprehensible peace. It is rest and comfort. It is life itself in its breadth and height. So where are the words in which His language and voice may be expressed?

God speaks, and everyone on the face of the earth can hear His voice, understand and respond as if he is being called personally by name. His voice is the voice of all the ages; it does not fade or die on the breeze, nor is it restricted or return to Him empty. There will come a time when He will call and the whole creation will rise from its death.

"If a man hears my voice ..." But no one can hear the voice of the Son of God except him who is raised in spirit to the level where God can direct and call him, the level of the Kingdom and life with God, that is, the level above daily events. There he can receive from Him instruction for his life and a plan for his salvation through these very daily events, and even through using them. No one can hear the voice of the Son of God except him who opens his heart and mind to understand His language, whose words and tones are made of love, tenderness, peace, kindness and constant fatherly care, no matter how cruel life and its circumstances may appear to be.

If your ear is spiritually trained to understand the symbols of the divine message as they appear in temporal events, you will hear the Lord's hand knocking at the door as you read the words. He will be knocking at your door, sometimes gently, sometimes hard, and you will hear His voice through the clamor and the storms, as well as through the gentle breeze. He calls you to open the door for Him, to receive from Him the mystery of His wedding feast, after sharing with you the bread of your tears.

The Lord is near. He is humble and His voice is low, lower than the voice of man, but deep, deeper than eternity itself.

[The Communion of Love by father Matthew the Poor (Matta El-meskeen)]