

a conversation between God and penitent Israel. In the first verse we may suppose the prophet of God to be the speaker, and then, from the middle of the second verse until the end of the third, we have a national confession of sin. God speaks again in verses 4-7. Israel, or, as it is here called, Ephraim (another name for the Northern Kingdom), continues the conversation in the first sentence of the eighth verse; God in the second. Israel says, "I am like a green fir tree;" God replies, "From me is thy fruit found." Then the prophet in the words of the ninth verse sums up the conversation.

Verse 1. O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God. If man is bad, there is all the greater reason for his speedy return to the Lord. And God would not urge sinners to return to him if it was not possible for them so to do. Every little obstacle to such a return has been removed by our God, and he will bestow all assistance needed by the repentant sinner. **Thou hast fallen by thine iniquity.** Nothing but our iniquity can make us fall. The difference between sinners is that the neighbors of some see their iniquity and the neighbors of others are ignorant of it, but in God's sight we have all fallen by it. As Hosea gives "the word of the Lord" in the preceding chapter, "Thou hast destroyed thyself, but in me is thy help."

2. Take with you words, and turn to the Lord. In the old days no worshiper would dare approach any god without gifts. Here the prophet, without belittling the ordained offerings, enforces the necessity of outspoken heart penitence. The words they are to take are given in the latter part of this verse and in verse 3. The contrast between words and realities so familiar to us was unknown to the Hebrew. **Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously.** Literally, "receive us for good," or "receive from us what is good and acceptable," that is, our penitent hearts. The act of expressing one's need has a tendency to intensify one's desire. Israel had been alienated from God; outspoken penitence would be a distinct reversal of this attitude. No sinner need now fear to come back to God, since the Redeemer came to take away all iniquity. "There are no taunts on his lips, no frowns on his brow, only infinite tenderness in his heart."—*Atkins*. **So will we render the calves of our lips.** Instead of young bullocks they were now to come with the sacrifices of penitent prayer. If an impenitent but kind-hearted man gives \$25 or \$50 or \$100 each year to the running expenses of some struggling church, all good men will rejoice; but if the time comes when from the depths of that man's heart he sings, "Just as I am, without one plea," this "sacrifice of his lips" will be immeasurably more acceptable to God. It is a pleasant, holy thought that each of us carries about with him wherever he goes the means of acceptable sacrifice to God—our hearts, our lips, our lives.

3. Asshur shall not save us. Tucked in between two rival empires, the little kingdom of Israel, like that of Judah, was compelled, sometimes by one power, sometimes by the other, to pay tribute, and of course it depended for protection against the dissatisfied power on the strength of the empire to which its tribute was paid. Asshur stands for Assyria. And Israel is now saying, "We will no longer depend on Asshur to save us from Egypt, but will depend on the Lord our God." **We will not ride upon horses.** In a broad sense, "will no longer depend upon warlike power," but particularly referring to Egypt, from which the horses of Palestine were imported. "Turning away from Assyria will not lead us to depend on Assyria's rival." **Neither will we say any more to the work of our hands, Ye are our gods.** Not only had they depended on men, but on gods that men made. Their repentance leads them to turn from all idolatrous conduct and feeling. **In thee the fatherless findeth mercy.** Israel had made himself fatherless by turning from his Father in heaven, but will now trust in him who is the Father of the fatherless.

4. I will heal their backsliding. God is the speaker, and this is the answer to their prayer, the blessing that comes in response to the sacrifice of their lips. Backsliding here stands for all unfaithfulness to God, from the slightest wrong to absolute sinfulness. **I will love them freely.** Spontaneously, with a love that has no relation to their merit, for they have no merit. So God loves us. **Mine anger is turned away from him.** God's anger is not whim, it is hostility to sin. If spiritual eyesight were clear, no man or woman could ever see an angry look on God's face, for the moment we turn toward him he is full of smiles and tenderness to us.

5. I will be as the dew unto Israel. There is no real dew in Israel, but there is a heavy mist which gathers through the night and rests quietly on the land, refreshing its streams, fertilizing its soil, and giving strength and beauty to flowers and fruit. So God comes to the worshipful heart, (1) without observation, (2) copiously, (3) with refreshing power, kindling all our dying graces, (4) making us fruitful. **He shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon.**