



MIGRATING BIRDS DEVOTIONAL

JEREMIAH 8:7

“Even the stork in the heavens knows her times, and the turtledove, swallow, and crane keep the time of their coming, but my people know not the rules of the LORD.”

EXPERIENCE

Geese flying overhead, the sounds of mourning doves cooing, and robins returning are certain signs that the spring season is near. A number of years ago in early April, I walked onto my front porch and was greeted by a robin building its nest on a beam above my head. My first impression was that this robin was not a good nest maker. The bird was making a mess. There were strands of grass hanging down and mud all over the floor below. Now, being a compassionate man, I felt bad for this robin, saying to myself, “perhaps it’s the first time she has attempted this task.” Over the course of that season, I put up with the mess and altered my path to avoid walking directly underneath the nest. Sure enough, in time the robin hatched her brood, raised them, and the nest was vacated. At summer’s end, I

cleared out the nest and cleaned the board. However, the next spring, the robin began building a nest in the exact same spot! I was more than a little frustrated, so I discouraged the robin's nest building efforts by clearing out whatever progress it made each day. I thought the bird would get the point, but it did not. One day I looked up and three blue eggs were sitting on the bare beam. Finally, I got smart and purchased bird spikes. I installed the spikes as soon as they arrived. You know what happened? For the next couple years the bird would build its nest on top of the spikes. There was no discouraging this robin from returning to its "home". The robin had decided my porch was its summer residence, and nothing I did could persuade this bird otherwise.

What migratory birds do you have most contact with in your area? Have you had any experiences with them as they come back to reside in your neighborhood or as they pass through?

CONTEMPLATION

Birds have a built-in homing instinct. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, "20-60 percent of migratory songbirds [like my resident robin] are likely to return to the same local area at least two years in a row."¹ Considering their high mortality rate over the winter, that means these birds' homing instincts are remarkably strong. We know this homing instinct is innate and not primarily learned because, according to the Cornell Lab, first year birds often strike out on their first seasonal migration on their own.² Somehow, they have the

¹ "Do Backyard Birds Return to the Same Spot Year after Year?," All About Birds, last modified April 1, 2009, <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/do-backyard-birds-return-to-the-same-spot-year-after-year/#>.

² "The Basics of Bird Migration: How, Why, and Where," All About Birds, last modified August 1, 2021, <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/the-basics-how-why-and-where-of-bird-migration/>.

innate ability to find their winter and summer homes even though they have never been there before and are not traveling with their parents.

God has something to teach us through migratory birds, their homing instinct, and their springtime return home. God has created birds with instincts, like robins, doves, geese, and ducks, in part to remind us to repent—to remind us to return home to the Lord. O that humans had such instincts! Left to ourselves and our sinful nature we do the opposite, we turn away from God and fall further and further away from the Lord.

Praise God that we are not left to ourselves. The Lord has given his people in Christ Jesus, the gift of a dove-like homing instinct. Doves have a particularly strong homing instinct, which is likely why God chose the dove as the bird for Noah to send out of the Ark, that it might return to him.³ God has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit. We have NO innate homing instinct like the dove does, but believers have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, a dove-like homing instinct that is not our own, but who convicts us and calls us home and empowers us to bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

PRAYER

Gracious God, thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit. Might your Spirit convict me, compel me to repent, and empower me to bear fruit in keeping with that repentance. Fill me with a yearning to return to you when I have wandered. Take this heart that is prone to

³ I am indebted to John Stott, Anglican pastor, theologian, and avid birder, for his insights into migrating birds and the connection to Jeremiah 8:7, as well as his making the connection between doves, homing instincts, and our need of the Holy Spirit. See below for more from Stott.

stray and soften it. By your mercy, give me a homing instinct that I do not possess in of myself, but that leads me home to you. In Christ's name. Amen.

CONFIRMATION

Jeremiah 8:7 makes clear that migrating birds are a biblical emblem of repentance. The preceding verses show that storks, doves, swallows, and cranes were not just Jeremiah's own figurative illustration but an illustration from the Lord himself. In verse 4, God tells Jeremiah, "You shall say to them [God's people], 'Thus says the Lord'". Evidently, God intends for his people to see and to be reminded of the concept of repentance via the migrating birds.

The Hebrew text is not as clear regarding the types of birds indicated by what are translated as swallows and cranes. Some English translations say "swifts and thrushes" (NIV). There appears to be some liberty for us to meditate upon the migratory birds of our region. Most people in the United States will never experience storks, but there are large unmistakable birds that fly northward every spring, their V-formation pointing toward home, honking their way north—almost as if to cry out, "Repent! Repent!" Robins are common to the entirety of the continental US and most of North America. Doves are widespread in the US also and, according to Ezekiel 7:16, a dove's mournful moaning is a reminder to grieve our sin. Let these migratory birds and many others remind you to turn away from sin and return home to your Lord.



Charles Spurgeon

From Sermon #2858 “Migratory Birds”.⁴

Charles Spurgeon preached an entire sermon on migratory birds, using the passage Jeremiah 8:7. He begins the sermon as follows: “IN our text the prophet makes use of the flight of migratory birds to teach a valuable lesson. He mentions the swallow, which is the most prominent among the summer visitors to our own country, but he also names the stork, the crane, and the turtledove—all of them familiar instances of birds that came, at a certain season, to Palestine, and punctual to the hour, at given changes of the weather, winged their way back again to warmer climes. Too many careless observers, like the peasant of whom Wordsworth writes— ‘*A primrose by a river’s brim A yellow primrose was to him, And it was nothing more,*’— would have seen those birds, and soon forgotten all about them, but the prophet, observing the wisdom of these wanderers of the air, contrasts it with the folly of man, who knows not “the judgment of the LORD,” and obeys not so readily the monitions of his God as the birds do the instinct by which He guides them to and fro. We shall mark these migratory birds, and set the wisdom of their instinct in contrast with the folly of mankind.”

⁴ <https://www.spurgeongems.org/sermon/chs2858.pdf>



John Stott

From his book, *The Birds Our Teachers*⁵.

“Now Palestine was (and still is) a corridor of bird migration, popularly called a ‘flyway’. Many species fly south in the autumn, through the Bosphorus, across Turkey and down through Palestine and the Nile valley, to winter in the warm climate of Africa. But when spring arrives, they all without fail return, first flying north, and then fanning out either west into Europe or east into Asia.

Jeremiah singled out storks. . . . I have myself watched White storks in springtime in Israel. In the early morning they feed in fields and dykes. But when the sun gets hot, thermal currents help them to lift off, and they soar to a considerable height of about 4,000 feet, before heading north to continue their journey. From their wintering grounds in southern Africa to their bulky rooftop nests in northern Europe they fly some 8,000 miles, their long red legs trailing behind them and their long necks stretched out in front of them.

It is reckoned that nearly half a million White Storks migrate over the Middle East every spring and autumn. They go and they return. The tragedy of the people of God was that they had gone away but had not returned.”

⁵ John Stott, *The Birds Our Teachers*, Collector’s Edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 18-19.