

A STORY OF
REDEEMING
LOVE

HOSEA



THE BOOK OF HOSEA
H

Introduction to Hosea

Sometimes, the practice of reading and trying to apply Scripture is a tedious and confusing process. We like passages that are clear cut and easy to understand, but more than that, we like passages that are easily inspiring and uplifting and point us to the goodness of God. Conversely, we struggle with passages that reveal God's judgment, God's anger and God's condemnation.

And as such, the book of Hosea fits strangely into both of these categories. There is a narrative portion to Hosea (chapters 1-3) that show God as a betrayed spouse through the object lesson of Hosea the prophet, who has been commanded to marry a spouse that will betray him. And in this, God uses it as an opportunity to display his unending love for his people, that even as they have been unfaithful to him, he will never stop loving them or caring for them. And this is the part of Hosea we like. But then Hosea has an extended prophetic portion that goes into details about how God's people have failed him. God brings a *covenantal lawsuit* against them and details all the ways in which they have gone wrong, and in this we see God's anger and disappointment with his people, as well as some of the natural consequences of the peoples choice. And this part of Hosea we do *not* like.

But what Hosea forces us to do, as readers of Scripture in the 21st century and followers of this same God, is to learn to *contextualize* both our reading and our faith. Because although Hosea does contain messages of judgment, it also contains *seven* messages of restoration and redemption for God's people. And at the heart of Hosea is the idea of God's love that will never abandon his people, even when it is perfectly within its right to do so.

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Week 1 Day 1

Read Hosea 1:1-3

Often when we point people to the Bible, we do so with the expectation that they will find hope, meaning and purpose in what they read. And while this is a good and healthy expectation for something that we believe reveals God to us, it's exactly that expectation that leads us to a bit of shock when we read the opening verses of the prophet Hosea. In fact, Richard Davidson points out that "many have insisted that God did not actually ask Hosea to marry a harlot,"¹ because they see it as so far outside of the norm of what we would normally expect from God and his word.

Yet to get caught up in the details of whether or not Hosea is literal is to miss the beautiful point that the prophet, and God speaking through them, is trying to make. Quoting Abraham Heschel, a pivotal Jewish philosopher in the post-Holocaust world, James Limburg writes that "Hosea dwells on what God has felt for Israel."² Limburg continues saying that "the anguish of God over a faithless people is like that of a husband over a wife who is ungrateful and unfaithful (2:8, 13)."³

In other words, Hosea is more than a book of shocking real-life metaphors. Hosea is a book with a message about God's deep love for his people *who have deeply wronged him*. But as much as it focuses on the wrong that God's people have done to him, and that we all continue to do to him, what it also reveals is a God who loves even when love has been betrayed, and a God who keeps coming back when anyone else would leave the relationship for good.

Reflection

If God's instruction to Hosea is literal rather than figurative, would that bother you? Would it change the perception that you have of God?

Central to the premise of Hosea is the assumption that God has feelings. Many religious thinkers over the centuries have asserted that God is *impassible* (without emotion). What do you think? Is it a good thing or a bad thing for God to have feelings?

¹ Richard M. Davidson, *Hosea*, Andrews Bible Commentary: Old Testament (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2020), 1064.

² James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, Interpretation Bible Commentary (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 6.

³ Ibid.

Week 1 Day 2

Read Hosea 1:4-9

I can think back on the times when my wife was pregnant with our children and we faced the task that every parents inevitably faces of naming the children. And I didn't expect the pressure of choosing a name that was both meaningful and acceptable. And in our culture, this is how we choose children's names; usually it's something that we like or meaningful to us. But in the culture of the Bible, names carried great meaning with them. And that cultural assumption is evident in the first chapter of Hosea as it describes the names of Hosea and Gomer's children.

The first child, Jezreel, while meaning "God sows," actually refers to the place where Jehu had brutally murdered King Ahab, Jezebel and displayed the severed heads of 7 of Ahab's sons (2 Kings 9-10). James Limburg asserts that naming a child Jezreel during this time would be similar to naming a child "Auschwitz" or "Hiroshima" in our modern world.⁴ The second child, interestingly not referred to as Hosea's child, but Gomer's child, implying that it was a child borne of unfaithfulness is named Lo-Ruhamah (Not-Shown-Mercy). The Hebrew word *Racham*, meaning mercy, was a covenantal word that God promised his people in the Exodus, and Lo-Ruhamah is the exact opposite, or undoing of it. And finally, Lo-Ammi, also only mentioned as a child of Gomer means "not my people."

The purpose here seems clear: these children represent the way that God's children, his people, have treated their father, God. Yet there is a beautiful point in this chapter that is unspoken. Even though these children bear these names, and two of them aren't even referred to as Hosea's children, Hosea still stays and parents them as their father. And if this picture is meant to portray God's relationship with his own children, then it also means that God has still stayed to parent his children as well.

Reflection

What is your initial impression of God's feeling toward his own people, that he would remind them of great violence, tell them that he would remove his mercy, and tell them that they are not his people?

What do you think of Hosea's children being called into service as prophetic symbols in this story?

⁴ Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, 9.

Week 1 Day 3

Read Hosea 1:10-2:1

Many of us have been in situations where we were asked if we wanted to hear the good news or the bad news first. Usually it all depends on our personalities and how we cope with the bad news in comparison to the good news. But in this specific passage of Hosea, God delivers good news that comes on the tail end of bad news. And this isn't just good news that will help God's people endure the bad news, it's good news that completely undoes the bad news given in the previous nine verses.

In the previous section, where Gomer's children were named Jezreel (a place of violence and bloodshed), Lo-Ruhamah (Not-Shown-Mercy) and Lo-Ammi (Not My People), representing the standing before God that God's people have brought onto themselves, in this section we see the complete reversal of all of this. God's people are now once again called his own people, they are called children of the living God. They will come together in Jezreel not for bloodshed, but for restoration. And all of this is an act of mercy. And as Richard Davidson points out, in the structure of Hosea itself, this isn't an isolated event. Rather, this is the first of *seven* promises of Israel's eschatological restoration, evoking the Jewish symbol for completeness and perfection.⁵ In other words, the message of Hosea is that God's people who have brought themselves to this bleak place will be restored completely by God.

And this is a crucial statement, not only on God's love for his people that continues to love when it has betrayed, but also on the messages of judgment that we find throughout Scripture. In the previous nine verses, God did promise judgment on his people for their wrongs. But in this verse, the promise God makes to his people is that he will also reverse the judgment that he himself has given. The message of Hosea is the message of a God who continues to show mercy, even when it seems that mercy is at its end.

Reflection

Hosea seems to be about the balance that can be found between God's judgment and God's mercy. How do you balance the ideas of God's judgment and God's mercy in your own faith journey?

If God is going to undo the judgment that he himself has pronounced, what do you think the purpose of judgment is?

⁵ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1065.

Week 1 Day 4

Read Hosea 2:2-13

Sometimes reading the prophets is a little bit like reading a suspense novel or watching a movie that is designed to lull you into a sense of complacency before scaring you with a quick jump or a sudden change of situations. And that's a little bit of what's happening in this specific chapter. The previous chapter has ended on a good and hopeful note that talks about the judgment that God has brought upon his people being undone and reversed by God himself. And one could expect from there that things would move into happier, more hopeful messages. But chapter 1 of Hosea was just a preview of what would actually happen and chapter 2 is where that judgment that must occur before there is restoration begins.

Chapter 2 of Hosea switches styles from a prose that just describes what's happening to a more formal, poetic tone. And this is because Hosea chapter 2 is actually modeled after a covenant lawsuit in the ancient near east, where one party in a covenant, a promise, has been wronged and is bringing formal charges against the one that has wronged them.⁶ And for the dual message of Hosea/Gomer that reflects Yahweh/Israel, the formal charges are those of a spouse talking to another spouse that has betrayed them. With Hosea and Gomer, the implication is clear. Two of Gomer's children are not even mentioned as belonging to Hosea. But this section of Hosea makes clear that for God, the charge of adultery is that his people have left him for other gods, specifically the Ba'als, believing that Ba'al brought them rain, crops and fertility.

And sometimes when we read passages in the Old Testament that talk about idolatry we wonder how these people could forget the living God in favor of a statue. But the same thing is true in every age: we wander and chase after anything that we think can make life better for us. And in the western world of the 21st century, perhaps we've traded idols of wood and stone for things like money, politics, power and sex. But the message to us is the same as it was to Israel: these are all things that fall under God's domain.

Reflection

Why do you think people who believe in God are often so prone to idolatry?

Do you think the metaphor of adultery between God and his people is a helpful metaphor for dealing with unfaithfulness to God?

⁶ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1065-1066.

Week 1 Day 5

Read Hosea 2:14-23

A betrayal of the closest relationships in our lives often elicits the strongest response from us because it strikes deep at the heart of who we are. And surprisingly, we see God making the same response in Hosea chapter 2. The first part of this chapter is God, the betrayed spouse, bringing his partner into a court of law and laying out the charges against them. And it shouldn't be underestimated that these charges are not arguable. God's partner has clearly betrayed him and chased after others. And in the patriarchal culture of the day, with Israel being portrayed as a woman, this would have had incredibly serious ramifications. And in this chapter, it's made clear that God as the betrayed partner would be within his right to move forward with the consequences against his jilted lover.

Yet as we saw in chapter 1 as well, we see a reversal of God's judgment in verses 14-23. And it's not hard to see that the entire tone changes as well. Previously where God was harsh in describing the betrayal against him, he now speaks tenderly to his partner, and even in the Hebrew of the day, uses sexually charged language to describe his love. Not that this describes any practice or expression of sexuality implied in the worship of Yahweh, but rather that our deepest and strongest human emotions are but a glimpse of the love that God has for us.⁷ But most significantly, this section contains the first mention in Hosea of the Hebrew *hesed* in verse 19. Often translated as simply "love" or "lovingkindness," *hesed* implies a love that doesn't quit when it should, and love that keeps loving even after it's been betrayed.

This second half of Hosea paints the picture of a merciful and gracious God that is often left out of any conversation surrounding God's judgment. Yet here as in chapter 1, any talk of God's judgment is balanced and tempered by describing God's unfathomable mercy. Perhaps when we speak of God's judgment, we should also do the same.

Reflection

What's your immediate response to God's sudden shift of tone? It is befitting of his mercy? Or do we sometimes want more judgment before we move on to mercy?

Why do you think there's a tendency to emphasize judgment without the mercy that follows?

⁷ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1067-1068.

Week 2 Day 1

Read Hosea 3:1-5

Sometimes in the Christian journey we discover that it's one thing to talk about God's love and unending mercy toward us and another thing completely to talk about the mercy of God that we put into practice. And in the short, third chapter of Hosea, that is exactly the experience of the prophet. He must now put into practice the beautiful mercy of God that has been described in the previous two chapters, and in this chapter pre-figures the ultimate act of God's mercy.

This verse has strange cultural relics from the ancient near east that need to be dealt with to understand where the whole thing is going. The "sacred raisin cakes" (vs. 1) were most likely delicacies that were distributed during festival celebrations of Ba'al, and therefore reinforce the previous point that the people have abandoned the worship of Yahweh for that of Ba'al.⁸ Regarding Hosea having to buy his wife again in verse 2, it's unclear why he would have had to pay a price for her, but what is clear is that the amount of currency described is no small price.⁹ In other words, he had to pay a great price in order to redeem the lover that had betrayed him. From there, the period of abstinence described in vs. 3 most likely describes the coming exile for Israel, where it's described in vs. 4 that they will have no "king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones..." But the crux of the text is found in vs. 5. After their exile, they will once again seek after God and David their King, most likely a reference to the Messiah.¹⁰

As such this text is a messianic prophecy. That God pays a great price to bring his unfaithful people back to him, and he does so with the hope that one day they will once again seek after him. What the prophet experiences with his wife is a description of what God, in the person of the Son, experiences with us.

Reflection

Why do you think that we may have a tendency to celebrate God's mercy toward us, but might have trouble showing it to others?

The period of abstinence between Hosea and Gomer refers to a period of exile for God's people. Why do you think such a period of "discipline" is required? How does it make you feel?

⁸ Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, 13.

⁹ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1068.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Week 2 Day 2

Read Hosea 4:1-3

Sometimes we tend to make things a little bit abstract before we get to the real concrete solution to a problem or an answer to a question. And in many ways, the first part of the book of Hosea has been sort of “abstract.” There are charges of unfaithfulness brought against God’s people, there are accusations of “adultery” as they chase after Ba’al instead of Yahweh. But up until this point there have been no real concrete statements as to what Israel has done wrong. But all that changes in Hosea 4 where God brings yet another covenantal lawsuit against his people, this time bringing specific charges and specific breaches of the law that they have committed.

Hosea 4:2 specifically charges the people with violating several of the 10 commandments. Cursing in this context specifically refers to calling a curse down on someone, more than likely in the name of Yahweh, then lying, murder, stealing and adultery – all specifically spoken against in the 10 commandments.¹¹ But beyond these specific violations of the law, the people are specifically said as having no “love,” in this case, *hesed*. As we saw earlier, this *hesed* is what defines God’s relationship with his people as a love that never ends. But on the reverse end, their love for him easily folds under challenge. And much more than being another charge of something done wrong, it reveals the vast difference between God and his people.

Where God has great reason to leave his people, his embrace of *hesed* prevents him from doing so. But while the people have been given no reason to leave God, they easily do so because of their lack of *hesed*. What all of this highlights is the simple fact that God is faithful to us in spite of our unfaithfulness to him, both in specific violations of the law, but also in our failure to love as he loves.

Reflection

Do you think that it’s possible for humans to have *hesed* love as God does?

How do you balance the specific violations of the law mentioned here with God’s constant return to grace through these chapters?

¹¹ Limburg, *Hosea*, 17.

Week 2 Day 3

Read Hosea 4:4-10

There are many times where we find ourselves wanting to judge others more harshly than we judge ourselves, despite finding ourselves in the same situation. And usually we approach the situation wanting some grace for ourselves while wanting someone else to be held to a more rigorous standard. And in a situation like we find in the book of Hosea where God has brought specific charges against his people, it would be less than surprising to find the people begin to accuse each other.

And almost as if he expects it as well, that's exactly what God addresses in this section, saying "let no one bring a charge, let no one accuse another..." (vs. 4). But it's not just any class of people that God is addressing here, but rather priests who have aided in Israel's sin rather than helping atone for it. As Richard Davidson says, "The priests, chosen to make atonement for sin, instead increased sin."¹² Additionally, there has been an arrangement where because there has been so much sin, there have been more offerings.¹³ But what God says he wants rather than their sacrifices is their love, their *hesed* (Hosea 6:6).

What this passage reveals is that sometimes there is a difference between the rituals and the piety that surround the worship of God and the posture of the heart that the worship of God creates. And one of the things that must be said based on this passage is that perhaps the rituals and faithful actions that describe the worship of God find less meaning when the hearts of the people performing those actions are not drawn toward God.

Reflection

As God predicts his people will begin doing, why do you think we have a tendency to point our fingers to others when things are going wrong?

What is the connection between the heart of a person and the faithful actions that they perform?

¹² Davidson, *Hosea*, 1069.

¹³ Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, 20-21.

Week 2 Day 4

Read Hosea 4:11-14

One of the challenges with faithful religion in every age is how we interact with the world around us. Certainly the world and its societies have always had values that conflicted with the values that God set forth with his people. And often there are two responses that God's people make in the face of a society with conflicting value. The first is to completely isolate from society to avoid being affected by its evil. But the second is often to adopt the ways of that society and normalize them and even make them sacred.

And it appears that what Hosea is addressing in this passage is the latter of these two responses. And in particular, what God's people seem to have adopted is the practices of the Ba'al fertility cult. Because the cult of Ba'al centered around fertility – the fertility of the land to bring forth crops and the fertility of people to bring forth children, the worship of Ba'al often included practices of ritualistic sex, which God rebukes through the prophet in this passage.¹⁴

And one of the questions that we seemingly always ask when we encounter passages like this is how God's people could so blindly engage in practices that seem to obviously contradict what God has declared as good or even normative. But while taking for granted the pervasiveness of ritualistic sex in ancient near eastern religions, I think what we tend to do is look with a critical eye at others that we are unwilling to use on ourselves. There are cultural ideas that have crept into popular Christianity that have no basis in Scripture or any teachings of Christianity. An easy example of this is something like the phrase "the Lord helps those who help themselves." In other words, the ways in which we normalize societal practices around hasn't really changed much. The only thing that has changed is the societal practices themselves. And part of following God is looking with wisdom at the world around us and determining what is helpful in this journey of following God and what is not.

Reflection

Why do you think that we usually have two extreme responses to societal practices in relation to Christianity? What would be a better "third way" when it comes to how we incorporate societal practices into our religion?

Why do you think we're so quick to criticize the situations like that found in Hosea 4, but slower to turn that same critical eye upon ourselves?

¹⁴ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1069.

Week 2 Day 5

Read Hosea 4:15-19

One of the hardest things that we go through in life is watching someone freely and consciously choose a course of action that you know will end poorly for them. And most of the time, if we're close with the person in question, we've had all the conversations and done everything that we can think of to convince them that their course of action is wrong. But sometimes there comes a point when nothing that you do or say will make much of a difference anymore and you have to leave them to their fate.

And that is exactly what is happening in this passage of Hosea. It's a passage that Richard Davidson calls "one of the saddest verses in the entire book."¹⁵ It's a passage where God is speaking to the two kingdoms of his people, the southern Kingdom of Judah and the northern Kingdom of Israel, also referred to in this passage as Ephraim (one of the principal tribes that made up on the northern Kingdom). God implores Judah, the southern kingdom to not go the way of Israel, realizing that Israel has become so addicted to idols, that like a stubborn heifer, there is nothing that will make them change direction. There is no amount of pleading that God can do with them that will make them change their course.

This passage represents the beauty and tragedy of believing in free will. It's a beautiful thing to believe in a God who will never force his way on his people and leaves space for his people to choose him freely. But that freedom leaves room for God's people not to choose him. That freedom leaves room for God's people to choose practices that are harmful to themselves and others. But what this passage reveals is that even when it grieves God deeply, God is still committed to providing his people with freedom.

Reflection

A lot of times we wonder why God doesn't step in and immediately change a situation like the one we're currently reading. But to do so would have implications for the freedom God has given us. What is the balance between having freedom and using freedom for destructive ends?

At what point do you think a person needs to be given their freedom and let go?

¹⁵ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1070.

Week 3 Day 1

Read Hosea 5:1-7

Maybe you've had an experience of talking to someone about Christianity, your faith, your belief in God, or your experience with Scripture and in the course of the conversation there is a reference made to the discrepancy between the Old Testament and the New Testament. This usually rests on the assumption that the God of the New Testament, revealed in Jesus, is a God of mercy, love, grace and gentleness while the God of the Old Testament is angry, vindictive and ready to punish anyone that violates any of his ideals. And while a proper reading of books like Hosea push back against this notion, passages like this seem to strengthen that stereotypical assumption.

This passage is essentially a continuation of what we saw in the previous passages, with God laying out his case in his "covenant lawsuit" against his people. In this case, it's the royal house and the priests that are accused of having lead the people astray. And more than leading them astray, the word that the NIV translates as "unfaithful" in vs. 7 in Hebrew has undertones of "acting treacherously,"¹⁶ implying that the people are actively working contrary to God and his purposes.

All of this serves to reinforce the underlying narrative of Hosea that Israel, like an unfaithful spouse, has betrayed God. And this passage makes note that this is not a one-off moment of passion, but a deliberate act of treachery against God as the faithful spouse. And while God's anger in this passage can come across as terrifying for those of us reading thousands of years later, it must be noted that this is the same God who, responding to the same charges of unfaithfulness in chapter 2, says that he will once again be married to his people forever in righteousness, justice, love and compassion (2:19).

Reflection

How do you think we should balance the anger of God seen in this passage with the compassion and love of God seen in others?

What do you think it means to "act treacherously" toward God? How do we balance God's reaction to those who have acted treacherously toward him with what we would expect from our own reactions if we were in God's situation?

¹⁶ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1070.

Week 3 Day 2

Read Hosea 5:8-15

Often there is a disconnect between those of us who live in the western world and speak one particular language when we read passages like this in the Old Testament that mention the names of places far removed from us and make references to events that we know little about. And because of this, when we get to passages like this, we skip right over them because we think they mean little to us. But what we find in this passage is actually significant.

This passage, like several of those that came before it, is a continuation of the covenantal lawsuit that God is bringing against his people. But in this passage, there is a distinction that we need to make between “Israel/Ephraim” and “Judah/Benjamin.” By this point in time, God’s people had split into two distinct nations, with the Kingdom of Judah in the south, primarily composed of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin with their capital in Jerusalem, and the Kingdom of Israel, composed of the rest of the tribes, but prominently lead by Ephraim, with their capital in Samaria. Thus, when the text talks about Ephraim/Israel being laid to waste by Benjamin, it is referring to God’s people *fighting a war amongst themselves*. And all of this is a result of their adultery and unfaithfulness to God.

Often when we talk about sin in our western conception, we talk about personal virtue or vice; that a person is either personally upholding their morality or corrupting it. And while there is always a personal component involved in sin, what Hosea reveals to us is that sin is not just something that stays at an individual level. Rather, it continues to grow until eventually there is fighting against one another.

Reflection

How do you think adultery/unfaithfulness to God eventually leads to in-fighting as we see in this passage?

What is the balance between sin that occurs at an individual level and sin that transcends to a corporate level where nations of family members, like Israel and Judah, can fight against each other?

Week 3 Day 3

Read Hosea 6:1-3

The purpose of courts in our world is primarily to uncover the truth. We have oaths that need to be taken to pledge truthfulness, we have rules about what kind of evidence can be submitted, and we have many other mechanisms that are designed to lead to the truth. And though the process can be flawed, it can be argued that this is the goal of anything “courtroom” related.

And the same can be argued for the present passage in Hosea. For the past several passages, God has been bringing a “covenantal lawsuit” against his people. He’s been showing them the exact nature of the charges against them so that there can be no accusation of a generic “unfaithfulness,” and instead the people are shown exactly what the charges against them are. And as we reach the end of this portion of the covenantal lawsuit, we reach the fourth passage of seven describing Israel’s repentance and restoration. In the chiasmic structure of Hosea, this is the most important of the seven because it’s at the center of the chiasm.¹⁷ And it is in this passage that the people themselves realize their need for repentance. All of the other passages center around God’s desire and willingness to accept the people as they come to him, but this specific passage is about the people realizing that they themselves need to “acknowledge the LORD” (vs. 3). There are both parallels to the Jonah experience, as well as foreshadowing of the death and resurrection of Jesus in this passage,¹⁸ but all of this begins with the people’s acknowledgement that they themselves must seek God.

In the journey with God, God pursues and constantly asks his people to come back to him, but he gives this to us as a choice. God does not force us into a relationship with him, but he gives us the freedom to choose him, but also to reject him.

Reflection

What is it about the “truth” of a situation that you think brings about repentance?

Why do you think this is the first time that God’s people acknowledge their own need to seek God instead of being sought by him?

¹⁷ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1071.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Week 3 Day 4

Read Hosea 6:4-11a

Maybe you've been in the situation where you told a child to apologize to another child for a wrong committed. Or maybe you yourself have found yourself in that situation, whether as a child or even as an adult. The thing that is plain and easy to see is that there is very rarely real contrition or repentance in these situations. Sorry is just the thing that needs to be said in order for the situation to be closed and to be able to move on to the next thing.

And this is essentially what Hosea 6:4 is saying about the repentance of God's people found in the previous passage. Although that passage is crucial to the overall structure of Hosea because it reveals the people's willingness to return to God and seek them based on their own initiative, the current passage shows God's suspicion as to whether or not that repentance is genuine, much like hearing a child forced into saying they're sorry. As Richard Davidson notes regarding vs. 4, "he compared their *hesed* ('covenant loyalty,' 'love,' 'faithfulness') with morning clouds and dew that dissipate when the sun rises."¹⁹ God's expectation is that the people's repentance will be short lived. But two verses later, in a verse that Jesus himself will quote to the Pharisees, what God pleads for is real *hesed* and acknowledgment of him rather than "meaningless, formalistic sacrifices."²⁰ In other words, God doesn't want more faithfulness to a system that absolves a person of true personal devotion and growth. God wants people's lives and hearts to be changed.

Often when we think about repentance, we think about the rituals involved in the faith. And sometimes we can mistake adherence to the faith for actual faithfulness. But what God reveals here in Hosea and is reiterated by Jesus in the gospels is that what God really wants is our lives to reflect his love and goodness.

Reflection

What do you think the difference is between faithfulness to rituals and the faithfulness that God wants?

What do you think it means to have *hesed* for God as he does for us?

¹⁹ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1071.

²⁰ Ibid.

Week 3 Day 5

Read Hosea 6:11b-7:2

If you have children or have spent a good amount of time around children, you're probably familiar with their behavior when they're trying to hide something. Whether it's a look they give or a forced attempt at being casual, they usually give themselves away before they're even asked about it. And lest we talk to harshly about children, adults do the exact same in this situation.

And this is exactly the situation that God has found himself in with his people. He's brought all the charges before them in a covenantal lawsuit. They've even come to the point where they recognize their need to turn back to God and acknowledge him (6:1-3). God however, suspects that this is disingenuous and that they will go right back to their own ways (6:4ff). And here, God speaks of them continuing to commit evil, thinking that God won't notice. Richard Davidson comments on this and says "Yahweh longed to restore Israel's fortunes and heal them. But despite his efforts to train and strengthen them, they had followed the way of evil, apparently oblivious of the fact that God knew all about their evil deeds."²¹

And this is indicative of a type of religion that put its ritualistic connection with God ahead of its personal connection with him. Commenting on this block of passages, James Limburg aptly notes "...when religion is conceived only in terms of church attendance, general decency, and doing what is expected, then religion may have become reduced to the satisfying of regulations..."²² All throughout Hosea, what God expresses to his people, and what God continues to express to us, is that he wants us to personally connect and return to him, to be faithful to him out of love, not obligation.

Reflection

What does religion look like when it is followed out of love rather than obligation?

Why do you think we substitute following the form of religion for having a relationship with God?

²¹ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1072.

²² Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, 30.

Week 4 Day 1

Read Hosea 7:3-7

Living in the Cold War and post-Cold War eras mean that we're used to the world's nations and superpowers engaging in statecraft by means of secretive projects and negotiations as well as practical alliances with other superpowers. This is really nothing new to us and isn't so surprising to us when we see it happen. We're familiar with "backroom deals" and shady negotiations behind closed door. And there's a degree to which we expect a lack of transparency from the powers that be.

But regardless of our expectation for things to work that way according to our systems, this is not how God intended the government of his people to operate. And that can be seen in his indictment of the shady practices of the kings and rulers of Israel in this particular passage. Richard Davidson writes "Hosea 7:3-7 probably depicts the last years of Israel's history as a nation, when one king after another took the throne by means of conspiracy, lies, and/or assassination...Yahweh compares the passion of the rulers for the fertility cult and for political treachery to an oven so hot that the baker does not need to stoke the fire throughout the baking process."²³

And it shouldn't be hard to see in this passage that what God desires from people in positions of leadership isn't just unchecked power and authority, but rather, *transparency and faithfulness*. And while conversations should be had about the place of politics within the world as the church spreads the good news of God's kingdom, we should always keep in mind that in any position of leadership, whether it be civic, religious or even domestic, what God desires is faithfulness, transparency and for his love to be reflected in all of our lives.

Reflection

Why do you think God responded so harshly to the practice of Israel's kings of being "shady" and secretive?

What do you think Christian witness would be in the world if we heeded God's call here for faithful and transparent leadership?

²³ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1072.

Week 4 Day 2

Read Hosea 7:8-10

If you're like me, you try to be as practical of a person as you can when it comes to problem-solving in the various issues in your life. When something comes up for me that needs to be solved, I dedicate the time, resources and mental energy that I have at my disposal to try to figure it out *before* I ask for help.

And in this passage of Hosea, this is what God accuses Israel of having done. Richard Davidson clarifies that the passage is addressing alliances that the Northern Kingdom has made with Assyria and Egypt and how they have flip flopped between the two, never fully committing to one.²⁴ Whether this is a result of trying to play political games and come out on top of two super powers of the day, or just inexperience, the text makes clear that Israel is being played by both of these alliances, with the prophet noting that "foreigners sap his strength, but he does not realize it. His hair is sprinkled with gray, but he does not notice" (7:9). And it is in verse 10 that the prophet and God both lament that despite this, Israel is not returning to God, but continuing trying to push forward in their own power. Though it's clear that this politicking will end in disaster, Israel is determined to follow their own course.

It makes me consider how often in my own life, both personally and professionally, I have found myself trying to push forward in my own power rather than relying on the God who can solve everything for me. Hosea has both a rebuke and a reminder: a rebuke to those of us, like myself, who do everything we can to rely on ourselves, and a reminder that God is willing to meet us wherever we are with the help that we need.

Reflection

Despite God's promises all throughout scripture to help whenever we need him, why do you think we all have the tendency to rely on ourselves?

The prophet, and by extension God, sort of mock the people in this passage for how much they've failed in statecraft. Do you think this holds any sort of relevance to the modern political situation?

²⁴ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1072-1073.

Week 4 Day 3

Read Hosea 7:11-16

Maybe you've been in a situation before, whether it was an interpersonal relationship with another person, or a situation where you were repairing something in your home or a car, but you have a sense that the situation you're addressing is bad, but then you get further into it and realize that it's worse than you thought it was. We encounter this in multiple situations in life, not least in the situations mentioned above. And that's how this passage functions within the current situation in Hosea.

The previous passage mentioned how Israel had failed at statecraft with both Egypt and Assyria, flip flopping between both alliances while getting played themselves. However, this text reveals that it's not just their unwillingness to ask God for help in their situation, but they have actively sought after other gods instead of Yahweh. Richard Davidson notes that the wailing and slashing mentioned in vs. 14 probably refers "to the violent practice of members of the fertility cult, who cut themselves to get the attention of Baal so he would provide rain."²⁵ In other words, their arrogance didn't just lead them to forgetting that God was willing to help them, but they've truly committed "adultery" against God by seeking another god instead of him.

And often when it comes to the idolatry we find in the Bible, we criticize God's people for being so easily deceived. However, we have our own idols to contend with; money, power, sex, self-sufficiency, "pride of life," and others. And often we turn to these "gods" far faster than we turn to God himself.

Reflection

What do you think drives us to other "gods" before we turn to God himself?

What is the correlation between Israel's pleas to Baal and their failure in their statecraft? If we're not careful, could this lead to a theology that promises that God will prosper us if we turn to him?

²⁵ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1073.

Week 4 Day 4

Read Hosea 8:1-6

When we talk about returning to God, the picture that we often get is “doing all the things that we’re supposed to,” acknowledging God, and everything will be great. But then we stumble upon passages like this one in Hosea and we find ourselves a little bit more than troubled, because the picture that we get is less of a God who is thankful that is people have returned to acknowledge him and more of a God who seems to think that what the people are doing isn’t enough.

The text begins with a great irony, calling the people to “put the trumpet to your lips” (8:1). The trumpet in question here is a shophar, the rams horn that was typically blown on the Day of Atonement to signify that the sins of the people were atoned.²⁶ And given the people’s confession that they acknowledge God (8:2), paired with this allusion to forgiveness, it comes as a surprise to us that God tells them of the doom that they’re about to experience. However, on a closer examination of the text it’s clear to see that while the people are “acknowledging” God, their practices are far from honoring him. They’re still maneuvering politically, still using their money on idols, and even still have an idol of a calf (reminiscent of Aaron’s calf in Exodus 32) as the primary deity in their capital city of Samaria.

All in all, what this text in Hosea shows us is that acknowledging God and following God are sometimes two vastly different things. And the task that remains before the church in the 21st century is to sort through whether we are simply acknowledging God or if we are following God.

Reflection

How would you define the difference between acknowledging God and following God?

Does a passage like this change the way that you think about God?

²⁶ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1073.

Week 4 Day 5

Read Hosea 8:7-14

Sometimes we find ourselves in situations that have a “best case-worst case” scenario. And for some reason as people, our tendency is to always lean toward the best case, or if not, toward a grey, middle area. And along with that comes the tendency to underestimate just how bad the “worst case” is possible of being.

And that is essentially what God is telling his people in this passage. They have been playing the political game with other nations, thinking that even if it ends poorly, they will still have some sort of standing or be able to maneuver their way out of it in some way. But God tells them that they have been “sowing the wind and reap the whirlwind” (8:7). In other words, they are playing with something far more dangerous than they imagine. As God keeps comparing them to a stalk that doesn’t flower, the message is that their current course of action will never come to the fruition that they think it will. As Richard Davidson says, “another metaphor describes Israel as a stalk that never reached maturity and thus would produce no flour. But even if it were to produce, the grain would be swallowed up by foreigners.”²⁷

And this changes the way that the past several passages in Hosea should be read. Rather than just the anger of God against a group of people who will not follow or acknowledge him, what God has been seeing is where this path that they are following will lead. And rather than just anger about being forgotten, perhaps what God is pleading with his people to do is change directions before the consequences of their actions come for them. And in this way, we are not dealing with an angry God, but a God whose deepest desire is for his people to be protected and to flourish.

Reflection

Is God’s anger here related to God’s desire for good for his people? How do we balance those things out?

Do you think that sometimes we expect God’s goodness to be expressed in protecting us from the consequences of our own actions?

²⁷ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1073.

Week 5 Day 1

Read Hosea 9:1-7

For most of us there are high points throughout the year marked by holidays. Christmas, Easter, Memorial Day, Independence Day, New Year, Labor Day and countless others not only commemorate things in our culture, but they also symbolize days off for us now where we can enjoy the goodness of family, friends and relaxation. And Israel also had these types of holidays, though many of them were religiously based. And perhaps the most prominent of these holidays was *sukkoth*, otherwise known as “the Feast of Booths.” As James Limburg says, it was “the biggest of ancient Israel’s three festivals. Its seven day duration was marked by rejoicing, celebrating the results of the farmer’s work during the past year and anticipating further blessings in the future... We can imagine how families looked forward to the week-long celebration... The call to ‘be glad and rejoice’ or to ‘rejoice and exult’ would have been very much in keeping with the mood of *sukkoth*.”²⁸

But it’s against that backdrop that Hosea says “do not rejoice.” In fact, he compares their celebrating to the prostitution that traditionally took place on the threshing floors.²⁹ In fact, this is the clearest comparison that we have gotten in a few chapters to the initial charge of adultery that described the people’s unfaithfulness to God. They gather together to celebrate God’s festivals while they continually chase after other gods.

And it seems that Hosea’s indictment here is in God’s people participating in acts of faithfulness, but not being faithful themselves. And as has been demonstrated time and time again throughout Hosea, the faithfulness that God wants isn’t a faithfulness merely to the outward forms of religion, but rather a faithfulness that is expressed in genuine love.

Reflection

Does God criticizing the faithful celebration of one of Israel’s festivals change the way we think about our faithfulness to the *outward* forms of religion?

What do you think genuine love for God looks like?

²⁸ Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, 31-32.

²⁹ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1074.

Week 5 Day 2

Read Hosea 9:8-14

In Alan Moore's now cult-classic comic book *Watchmen*, now adapted to various movies and TV shows, he asks the question, "who watches the watchmen?" It's a critique of not just the normal superhero genre, but the fundamental assumptions that we make about the concept of a superhero; someone with unlimited power and because of that power, limited oversight and restraint. The point being, even those in power – and those with great amounts of power – must also be subject to the same rules and authority structures as the rest of us.

And in this text, God introduces the prophet, presumably Hosea who has been writing and even living-out God's experience with his people, as a watchman. The prophet has the responsibility of guarding, guiding and directing God's people back to the path that he has laid out for them. But this is by no means a *safe* calling. In fact, God explicitly says that the people have set traps for the prophet and that even in God's house there is hostility against him (9:8). But this is not what people always expected of prophets. There are many examples from the Old Testament, such as that of Ahab in 2 Kings 22, where so-called "prophets" are called in to simply reaffirm what the king or authority figure already wants to do. James Limburg helpfully distinguishes the real prophetic calling of a "watchman" versus other prophets who are merely "yes-men."³⁰

In the grand scheme of Hosea, where God has accused the people of adultery in chasing after other gods and where he's shown the results of that practice, God sends a prophet to be a watchman and remind kings, priests and other leaders over God's people to remember the God that called them, blessed them and liberated them rather than the gods of their own making.

Reflection

Do you think of prophets as "watchmen" or "yes-men?"

The calling of a prophet, at least in this passage, seems difficult and dangerous. Why do you think so many claim to be prophets in light of this?

³⁰ Limburg, *Hosea*, 34.

Week 5 Day 3

Read Hosea 9:15-10:4

Those of us who come from an Arminian (belief in free will) theological background put a great premium on the love of God. If God gives all of us freedom to choose or reject him, then it makes sense to say that the healthiest scenario in which we would choose him would be on the basis of love rather than fear. And as a result of this, we recoil when we hear things like one of the oldest pieces of American religion, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” because the concept of a God who is angry is not only terrifying to us but it undermines our belief in what kind of deity the God we believe in actually is. Yet in this passage in Hosea, God says “I hated them there... I will no longer love them” (9:15). How do we deal with passages like this?

Richard Davidson is helpful in making sense of this passage, saying “to ‘hate’ in this context means to reject...This was no insensitive, arbitrary abandonment of His people. Letting them go caused God deep anguish (see Hos. 11:8-9).”³¹ And perhaps this argument is clarified a bit by what we find in chapter 10; Israel found itself in a place and time of prosperity and decided to build more altars and more sacred stones. There’s great disagreement as to whether this was part of the religion that worshipped Yahweh or whether they were altars and stones to Baal³² but Gilgal, where all of this is taking place, was also the place that Saul became king of Israel (2 Sam. 11:14-15) as a result of what the people wanted rather than what God wanted.

All in all, this is a passage that recounts all of the ways in which God’s own people have rejected him. And while God’s words in this passage remain deeply unsettling, what is important to notice is that God does not do the things that he says he will in this passage. Rather than hating them and no longer loving them, God continues to try to woo his people back to himself.

Reflection

How do you feel about God “hating” his people in this passage?

What do you make of the discrepancy between God’s words and God’s actions? Does it help this situation? Or does it complicate matters because God doesn’t do what he says he will?

³¹ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1075.

³² Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, 35-37.

Week 5 Day 4

Read Hosea 10:5-8

Most of the time when we think of the word “prophecy,” we think of a group of strange people that can tell the future, burdened with the foreknowledge of the prosperity of destruction of people. And while there is indeed what we would call “predictive prophecy” in the Bible, most of the prophets found in Scripture fall more in line with what we call “classical prophecy,” that is, bearing a specific message for a specific people and time from God. And most of Hosea has fallen into this category. The prophet has been tasked with calling God’s people, who have committed “adultery” against him, back into relationship with him. However, this passage shifts from classical prophecy to a predictive prophecy, predicting that Israel’s actions will lead them to destruction at the hands of the Assyrians.³³

And this is the aspect of prophecy that perhaps bothers us a little bit. God, and by extension, the prophet, know that destruction is coming for God’s people. They even know who will be bringing that destruction to them. So why don’t they prevent it from happening? It could be argued that this entire book of Hosea is God’s plea with the people to not let this fate come upon them, and stop playing politics with the kingdoms around them and turn back to him. However, as James Limburg says, “the citizens of Samaria are much concerned for the welfare of the golden calf at Bethel.”³⁴

In other words, despite God’s continued pleas to the people, they are far more interested in their golden calf, which will eventually just be plunder for the Assyrians, than they are the wisdom of God. Perhaps the bigger question that we should ask ourselves is what we find ourselves more interested in than the wisdom of God.

Reflection

What’s your reaction to God predicting doom for a group of people?

What do you think we find ourselves more concerned with than the wisdom of God?

³³ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1075.

³⁴ Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, 36.

Week 5 Day 5

Read Hosea 10:9-15

Maybe you've been in a meeting or a conversation where it felt like someone had something that they wanted to say, but they never came right out and said it until someone finally told them, "just say what you need to say." And in Hosea, God certainly hasn't been "waiting" for the right moment to say what he wants or needs to say. But he has been taking his time, working up to the moment to express exactly what he wants to express to his people.

And that moment finally comes in Hosea 10:12. After talking about the corrupt practices of the people for the past several chapters in both the religious and political realm, along with the destruction that it will inevitably lead to, God finally extends the invitation to his people to "sow righteousness for yourselves and reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unplowed ground" (10:12). This breaking up of unplowed ground most likely refers to the people's insistence on doing everything their own way. They need to do the hard work of breaking through these patterns, but the next few verses reveal the tragic truth. God tells them "you have eaten the fruit of deception. Because you have depended on your own strength and on your many warriors..." (10:13). Rather than doing the work of repentance and changing their ways, they decide that their best course of action is to trust themselves.

And this has a particularly poignant message for the western world in the 21st century where self-sufficiency is king. We've become so good at self-sufficiency that we see it as a sign of weakness to have to rely on anyone else. But God's message to us is the same as it was to his people long ago: don't learn to depend so much on yourself that you're unable to break up your own unplowed ground.

Reflection

Why do you think these people were so bent on their own self-sufficiency?

How does self-sufficiency sneak its way into our lives with God?

Week 6 Day 1

Read Hosea 11:1-7

Perhaps as you've read through the past few chapters of Hosea, you've found them a little bit difficult because of the constant messages of judgment and doom directed toward a people whose choices have led them to the end of their path. If that's the case, in this chapter you get a glimpse of the more compassionate, loving part of God that we tend to gravitate toward.

Richard Davidson talks about this passage, noting that it "contains the most tender depiction in all of Scripture of Yahweh's love for Israel, His own son."³⁵ And this is quite a departure from the previous passages in Hosea in many ways. Firstly, we get the introduction of a new metaphor regarding God's love for his people. While in the first few chapters of Hosea, they've been depicted as God's spouse, here in chapter 11, they make a shift to being God's son. And this is a critical metaphor for understanding God's love for his own people because this is how Jesus will come to define himself – as God's one and only son, acting as the one, true faithful Israelite. But secondly this is God's shift from judgment and righteous anger with his people to a more tender approach. And in this, we may get a sense of why the past few chapters have been so emotional. God has led them and guided them as a parent guides a child, but in the end, they have chosen what is harmful and damaging to themselves.

And in this, we see God as the compassionate parent. And as a compassionate parent, God is still wanting to guide and teach us as he wanted to guide and teach his people.

Reflection

How do verses like this make you feel in light of the more doom-oriented judgment passages that we've seen in Hosea?

Does this passage balance out the judgment passages in Hosea? Or do you think it just further complicates those passages?

³⁵ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1075.

Week 6 Day 2

Read Hosea 11:8-11

I had a few professors in my undergraduate experience who would often refer to Bob Dylan as “the great prophet,” not because he foretold the future in any way, but rather because he had a gift for accurately describing the social condition of a given day. And there’s a particular Bob Dylan song that comes to mind when reading this passage: “With God On Their Side.” It addresses the assumption that we all make, for better or for worse, that God is like we are and therefore responds to every situation in the same way that we would.

Yet that is a notion that this particular passage in Hosea confronts directly, with God noting in vs. 9 that he would not carry out the destruction himself that he’s talked about in the previous chapters, stating that “For I am God, and not a man – the Holy One among you. I will not come against their cities” (11:9). In commenting on this passage, James Limburg makes special note that God’s description of himself as the “Holy One” drew special attention to his transcendent qualities.³⁶ When thinking about God’s transcendence, what often comes to mind are scenes like Sinai with God thundering above the mountain and declaring to Moses that he could not behold God in all of his glory (Exod. 33). Yet God’s transcendence in this passage; his insistence that he is not like humans is that he will *not* be “vindictive, arbitrary, and heartless.”³⁷

Often when we think about God’s holiness, we think of those qualities that we can’t even begin to approach or comprehend. But perhaps in a much more fundamental way, what it truly refers to is God’s otherness for us, especially in his willingness to forgive.

Reflection

What does it mean for you that God is the “Holy One,” completely other from us?

Why do you think that we often insist that God is like we are instead of allowing God to form who we are?

³⁶ Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, 41.

³⁷ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1076.

Week 6 Day 3

Read Hosea 11:12-12:6

Maybe there are some moments in your personal history that you would rather not remember, whether they are embarrassing moments that are of little consequence, or moments where you knew you were in the wrong and either hurt another person or yourself. Most of us would prefer not to have those moments brought up in conversation or to be relived in our memories at all.

And as this “covenant lawsuit” that God brings against his people progresses, God begins bringing up the past after he says he “has a charge to bring against Judah; he will punish Jacob according to his ways” (12:2). Upon hearing that pronouncement, what we would usually expect would be those moments of failure or embarrassment in the past where God’s people got it vastly wrong. But instead, God does something incredibly surprising and brings up the moments in the life of the historical Jacob that were centered around *forgiveness*. Richard Davidson notes that “Hosea focuses on Jacob’s positive experience of repentance at the Jabbok River, where with anguish and tears he struggled and prevailed against the Angel, and on Jacob’s night vision at Bethel.”³⁸ The purpose of this is for God’s people to repent and turn to God as Jacob repented and turned to God. And God finally reveals what he truly wants of them outside of their rote devotion to the ceremony of their religion; “maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always” (12:6).

More than anything else, this passage reinforces the heart of this prophetic book of Scripture. Where God could hold grudges and bring up everything wrong that his people have done, he chooses instead to bring up their times of faithfulness and repentance in order to call them to faithfulness and repentance again.

Reflection

Why do you think God avoids talking about everything Judah has done wrong and instead remembers Jacob’s times of repentance?

Can there be true repentance and/or forgiveness if the wrong done has not been fully acknowledged?

³⁸ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1076.

Week 6 Day 4

Read Hosea 12:7-10

Part of the story that gives meaning to the United States is the opportunity to keep progressing in life from humble beginnings to attaining a more comfortable living. Colloquially, as the song puts it, “we started from the bottom, now we here.” Or, in earlier years, “we’re movin’ on up.” In many ways, this represents the promise and opportunity of a person or a group of people being able to make something of themselves. And we are far from the first people group in history to value this upward mobility.

As we see here in this passage of Hosea, this is what God’s people have been focused on as well, saying “I am very rich; I have become wealthy. With all my wealth, they will not find iniquity or sin” (12:8). Apparently, God’s people had fallen into a trap that is not unlike one that we fall into in our society in believing that great wealth and influence, in some ways, cover a multitude of sins, believing that more money often means more virtue in some senses. But God immediately confronts this assumption in the next verse, in a somewhat dry and blunt way. God essentially tells the people, I remember when you came out of Egypt, recently freed slaves as you were and lived in tents, and I can make you live in tents again. God is essentially telling the people that he is unimpressed by their wealth and he does not buy into the narrative that their wealth gives them any sort of virtue. And interestingly, he calls their mind back to the Exodus; a time when they had nothing and were therefore entirely dependent upon him.

This particular passages intersects with many points in our own culture, because we often buy into the same cultural narrative surrounding money that God’s people did. And perhaps this is God’s reminder to his church in the 21st century: he isn’t as impressed by our opulence as we are. And perhaps what God wants from us is something much more simple – to rely entirely on him.

Reflection

What about human nature do you think causes us to equate the value of a person with their financial standing?

Do you think wealth and reliance upon God are mutually exclusive? What do you think a good relationship between these two concepts looks like?

Week 6 Day 5

Read Hosea 12:11-14

If you can speak or communicate in more than one language, then you're familiar with how multifaceted language can be. Some words in a particular language have no good translation in another language, so you're forced to use multiple words to describe the picture that one word describes in the original language. And often, for those who don't speak the language that a person is using, we miss out on the beauty and depth of meaning that they are trying to convey.

And that's largely what's happening in this passage in Hosea. To those who don't speak or know Hebrew, it reads like much of the same that we've seen in the past eleven chapters. We see God's judgment against the Northern Kingdom of Israel for not following his ways along with the names of some places that we're unfamiliar with and a mention of Jacob. But in Hebrew all of this is significant. Gilead, in Hebrew, literally means "heap of witness,"³⁹ and was the place where Jacob, when he was feeling Aram, made a covenant with his relative Laban and built an altar to commemorate it. It refers to an act of faithfulness and repentance by Jacob after he had lived up to his name as "the deceiver." Yet Israel is not following the path of their forebearer. Instead of building their own "heaps" of repentance, they build altars on which to sacrifice bulls. And to this, God says he will reduce their altars to "heaps."

This is God's plea to his people to remember their history, and to remember the story of the one who gave them their name, Israel. He too went his own way, but after repenting, built an altar that signified that things would be different for him from now on. And this is what God encourages his people to do, both in Hosea, and in the present day.

Reflection

Why do you think repentance is so difficult sometimes?

What are things that we often hold on to, like Israel's altars to sacrifice bulls, that God should reduce to "heaps" instead?

³⁹ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1076.

Week 7 Day 1

Read Hosea 13:1-3

Perhaps as we've read through Hosea you've been simultaneously moved by God's continued faithfulness to the people in the face of their unfaithfulness and horrified by the pictures of judgment and the harsh attitude that God takes toward his people in their unfaithfulness. We've seen extended passages where God brought the "covenant lawsuit" against his people. We've seen God's own responses in the middle of those lawsuits where he asserts that he can't stop loving his people and he can't stop being faithful to them despite how they've been unfaithful to him. But the difficult aspect of Hosea that we have to contend with in this passage is that just because God hasn't stopped being faithful to his people doesn't mean he can spare them of the consequences that they've created for themselves.

The passage starts with the NIV saying "Ephraim spoke with trembling" (13:1). In this, we get the picture of someone who is afraid, and probably rightfully so after all of the passages that we've read about God's judgment against his people. But Richard Davidson points out that this is probably more out of piety than fear.⁴⁰ If the trembling happens out of piety, then we would expect that Israel would have returned to God and been spared the consequences of their actions. But it's important to note that it is not just God that the people have grieved. They've also been playing statecraft with Egypt and Assyria (7:11), and it is not God that eventually destroys them, but the Assyrians.

This forces us to contend with a more difficult aspect of God's judgment in the Bible. Just because God continues to be faithful to his people does not necessarily mean that he can spare them of the consequences of their own making.

Reflection

Does it trouble you that God's forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean sparing us from the consequences of our own actions?

Is there a sense in which you think that because Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians that they were also experiencing God's judgment? Why or why not?

⁴⁰ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1077.

Week 7 Day 2

Read Hosea 13:4-9

There are many passages in the Old Testament that are difficult to contend with. Passages that speak of things like genocide, the anger of God, judgment, amongst many other things. And upon first glance of this passage, it seems as though it falls into that category. On the initial reading, it seems as if God is saying that he is going to devour his people because of how they have forgotten him despite his faithfulness to them. But once we dive into the passage a little deeper, I think what we see is a much more complex picture that points to the God who has continually said that he will not leave his people, despite what they've done.

The text opens with God recounting all of the things that he has done for his people, events that were foundational to their very identity. He rescued them from slavery in Egypt, cared for them in the wilderness, and provided for all of their needs. Richard Davidson points out that his claim to be the LORD (Yahweh) God in vs. 4 is a callback to the opening line of the 10 commandments.⁴¹ But this isn't the only piece of encoded language within this text. Davidson also points out that the reference to a leopard in vs. 7 is likely a picture of Assyria.⁴² Which gives room for the interpretation that perhaps the "them" that God refers to when he speaks of destruction is not necessarily his own people, though they are destroyed by the Assyrians, but the Assyrians themselves.

While this passage is still unclear, it does seem to make sense within the argument of the rest of Hosea that God continues to care for his people, and perhaps that includes bringing his judgment against those that have harmed them.

Reflection

How do the "judgment" passages like this make you feel?

Do you think that this is God speaking to his people, or speaking about the Assyrians that will destroy his people? Why or why not?

⁴¹ Davdison, *Hosea*, 1077.

⁴² Ibid.

Week 7 Day 3

Read Hosea 13:10-16

The way that we tell stories, narratives, etc., in our culture usually has us hoping for a “good ending.” Our brains latch onto stories where all of the complications come somewhere in the middle, are overcome, and then the end makes us feel good about the way that things resolve. However, Hebrews wrote things differently. For them, in chiasmic form, the good resolution wasn’t at the end, but rather in the middle.

And that is largely what we experience in this passage. Verses 10 through 13 are about how God’s people have continued to be foolish despite his goodness to them. Verses 15 and 16 are about the judgment that they will receive as they are destroyed by the Assyrians. And both of these leave us feeling deeply uneasy. However, for those reading this in their original language, their eyes immediately fix on verse 14, the center of the chiasm, where God promises that he will deliver his people from the grave, redeem them from death and declares that death has no power over them. As Richard Davidson says, this is the sixth of the seven promises of hope and salvation for God’s people.⁴³ And the meaning here should not be missed: this book is full of God’s disappointment, God’s heartache, and in some cases, even God’s anger. But it’s center, and its main point is God’s promise, his complete promise, to restore his people.

And perhaps as we read through and process all of God’s talk of judgment and destruction, it should be tempered with the reality of God’s promises to his people to redeem them from death by taking their destruction upon himself.

Reflection

Are these “restoration” passages enough to temper the judgment passages in Hosea for you?

Does all of the judgment that read through Hosea change when viewed through the lens of God’s redeeming action for his people? Or is that too shallow of an answer to a complex problem?

⁴³ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1077.

Week 7 Day 4

Read Hosea 14:1-8

For its duration, I was obsessed with the trial of former NFL player Aaron Hernandez. Eventually, he was charged with the murder of one of his friends, but the detail about the trial that sticks out in my memory was that in the closing arguments, the defense argued that bad choices had lead Hernandez to the scene of the murder, but there was no evidence that he had been the one that pulled the trigger. This was shocking, because according to the jury, up until that point, none of the admissible evidence had proven that he was there, yet his own defense gave that point up, which lead to his conviction. The point: closing arguments are important. And the closing argument of Hosea is incredibly important for God's plea to his people to return to him.

This chapter is crucial because you can see God and the prophet both urging the people to return to God, even telling them exactly what to say. "Hosea urged Israel to return to Yahweh, even suggest what to say... He encouraged them to come boldly, with the promise that in God the father/orphan finds mercy/compassion."⁴⁴ This is how serious God is about their return. But this passage is also revealing in that it shows us that God's grievance against his people isn't just in that they have committed "adultery" against him with Baal, but also with Assyria in that they have trusted another nation to save them more than they have trusted God. And perhaps this is the crux of what Hosea is actually about. It's not just that these people have gone after other gods, they've trusted everything around them *except* God.

At the very least, the message of Hosea should force those of us who worship and believe in God to ask ourselves what we are trusting in our lives and in our world more than we trust God.

Reflection

Do all of the judgment passages in Hosea change a little bit for you when you see that God goes so far as to even give the people the very words to repent?

What are some things that you think we put more trust in than God?

⁴⁴ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1077.

Week 7 Day 5

Read Hosea 14:9

Maybe at some point in your life you've come across something that was clearly an afterthought. Whether it was an interesting layout in a house, a hastily put together party or event, or maybe the finale of your favorite TV show, afterthoughts are usually pretty obvious. And the last verse of Hosea seems like it would be a bit of an afterthought. God and the prophet have made their final plea to the people in the previous eight verses, even giving them the exact words and actions needed for repentance. Yet Hosea finds one last thing to say. And once we grasp that last thing, it's clearly not an afterthought.

Richard Davidson comments on this verse that "the final lesson of Hosea is a wisdom saying inviting wise readers to understand and know the contents of his message; that is, to apply it to their own lives in practical ways."⁴⁵ Because the truth is, you and I don't live in the Northern Kingdom of Israel where Baal worship is a daily and tempting practice. We don't live in a socio-economic reality where we rely on the Assyrian or Egyptian empires to save us from invasion. We don't even live in a theocracy that was established particularly by God and in unique ways honors and follows God in its civic and political practices. And we certainly have not been commanded by God to marry unfaithful partners and allow them to be unfaithful to the point of even questioning the legitimacy of our own children. In that sense, Hosea is incredibly far removed from us. And when that happens, we're often not sure how to interact with such a book. But, the beauty of this wisdom saying is that it recognizes that we may not be in the exact situation, but we are in similar situations where there is crossover. We may not worship Baal, but many in our culture worship power and money. We may not rely on Egypt or Assyria, but we too often become consumed by politics. And we may not bear with unfaithful spouses, but that doesn't mean we live in a world of rampant hedonism and consumerism.

And what Hosea calls us to is to find faithfulness to God *within our own context*. And in that sense, Hosea and his message will always be relevant.

Reflection

How do we go about the process of contextualizing our faith?

How do we contextualize and live the message of Hosea without confusing some things that Hosea intended for his original audience that may not fit our context or circumstance, like a theocratic monarch?

⁴⁵ Davidson, *Hosea*, 1078.

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