

MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HOSEA

Notes for Week One: Children Of The Living God (Hosea 1:1-2:1)

After looking at some verses in which Jesus uses one of Hosea's key ideas, we shall meet Hosea and see the unusual way in which God spoke through his life. The opening chapters of Hosea show us the contrast between God's love for us and our persistent misunderstandings of him. We are children of God through his grace and mercy, not through our own goodness or knowledge.

Introduction - Learn What This Means (Matthew 12:1-8 & 9:9-13)

Jesus twice quoted Hosea 6:6 - "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" - to the Pharisees, emphasizing this idea as an important part of God's perspectives. The problem with the Pharisees was not their teachings in themselves, for they were right far more often than they were wrong. Their problem was one of attitude and viewpoint, valuing correctness above more important spiritual qualities.

Misunderstandings about God can lead to condemning the innocent (Matthew 12:1-8). When the Pharisees criticized Jesus' hungry disciples for picking some grain from a field on the Sabbath day, they were partially right about the letter of the law - the Sabbath laws presumed the planning needed to avoid work on the Sabbath* - but certainly wrong in their application of it.

* For example, when God sent manna, he sent it only six days each week; they had to gather enough for two days on the day before the Sabbath. Yet none of this was ever spelled out precisely in the law. Even under the old law, God called his people to think in terms of priorities and perspective instead of firm rules.

Jesus asks, "haven't you read" about David and his friends breaking the law by eating consecrated bread*. Even a clearly stated point of law can be superseded, in God's mind, by a more important priority. Referring to Hoses 6:6, Jesus tells the Pharisees that they would not have gone astray if they had known what it meant that God desires mercy, not sacrifice.

* See 1 Samuel 21:1-6, during the period when David was constantly fleeing from Saul's attempts to kill him. Ahimelech the priest accommodated David's request to eat the consecrated bread, seeing that the need of God's anointed outweighed the law that forbade anyone but Levites to eat the consecrated bread.

A similar incident occurs during Jesus' dinner with the "sinners", at the home of Matthew the tax collector (Matthew 9:9-13). When the Pharisees are unhappy that a teacher like Jesus would associate with "sinners", Jesus notes that the sick, not the healthy, need a doctor. In reality, sin sickness is universal. There are only those who are aware of their need and those who deny it.

Pharisaism is not a matter of specific beliefs - a Pharisee is simply someone who forces his ways on others, who feels spiritually superior to others, or who tries to control others. Yet let us not dwell on them. Quoting Hosea 6:6, Jesus tells them to, "go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'". And so, by studying Hosea, we shall hope to do this.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Based on these examples, what might it mean that God desires mercy, not sacrifice? What similar situations might we encounter?

The Historical Setting (Hosea 1:1)

The prophet Hosea lived in the northern half of Israel, during the era in which the nation was divided into two rival kingdoms. He mentions the rulers during his lifetime, to give us a time

frame for his prophecies. His message itself is largely timeless; so we shall take note of the historical background only insofar as it helps explain some of the details in the book of Hosea*.

* In the ancient Hebrew Bible, Hosea and the other 11 so-called "Minor Prophets" were in one book called The Twelve Prophets, or simply The Twelve. The order of the "Minor Prophets" is roughly chronological.

The divided kingdom arose after Solomon's death, when Israel split into a northern half and a southern half. From Solomon's death in 931 BC to the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC, "Israel" technically referred only to the Northern Kingdom; but the name was still used to refer to the nation as a whole. The north was often referred to as Samaria (its capital) or Ephraim (its most dominant tribe). The Southern Kingdom, ruled by the descendants of David and Solomon, was usually referred to as Judah, after its dominant tribe. Judah kept its capital in Jerusalem.

Hosea lived during the 8th century BC, with his prophetic messages probably coming sometime between 760 BC and 730 BC. He was from the Northern Kingdom, but his mention of several southern kings suggest that he may have lived there for a while*. The North was conquered by Assyria in 722 BC, so Hosea might have lived to see that. During the same period, the Southern Kingdom was undergoing a period of wide swings between religious reform and open idolatry.

* The reigns of the Southern kings in Hosea 1:1 extend well past the reign of Jeroboam II, so Hosea may have originally lived in the north, and later moved to the south.

Hosea mentions several kings of the south*: the faithful Uzziah (Azariah) had a long, successful reign, but it ended sadly and disastrously when he became prideful late in life (2 Kings 15:1-7, 2 Chron. 26:1-12); Jotham was well-intentioned but very weak (2 Kings 15:32-38, 2 Chron. 27:1-9); Ahaz was idolatrous and foolish (2 Kings 16:1-20, 2 Chron. 28:1-27, Isaiah 7); Hezekiah was Judah's greatest religious reformer up to that time (2 Kings 18:1-21, 2 Chron. 29:1-32:33). Meanwhile, from a secular viewpoint King Jeroboam II of Israel was one of the Northern Kingdom's most successful kings. But he was an idolater and a thoroughly worldly individual.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How might Hosea's lifetime reflect features common to almost any era? What aspects of his era might be unusual or unique? How would any of this affect our understanding of his prophecies?

Hosea's Wife & Children (Hosea 1:2-9)

God told Hosea to form a family that provided living examples of his teachings. This came at considerable personal cost to Hosea himself, not least because he had to endure a marriage with a woman who would never return his faithful love and selfless devotion. Yet this sad situation also shows us what God gladly endures in his relationship with us, out of his love for his people.

Hosea's own life illustrated his teachings*, as the prophet's wife symbolized the spiritual ills of Israel (1:2-5). God specifically told him to marry a prostitute**, using the marriage between a faithful prophet and a faithless prostitute to symbolize the unequal relationship between a faithful God and a faithless people who indulge in spiritual "prostitution" through their worldly attitudes.

* God also frequently told Ezekiel and Isaiah to undergo humiliating or unpleasant things. The symbolic actions here are a graphic depiction of the things God himself endures out of his love for his people.

** The Hebrew words for "prostitute" and "prostitution" are used several times in the passage. Some versions, such as the NIV, choose to translate them with nicer-sounding euphemisms.

God uses the prophet's marriage as a shocking means of helping us to see things from his point of view. So many of our divisions, pretensions, and mistakes stem from our inability to look at things from God's viewpoint. This is the role of the prophetic books in the Old Testament - they step back from the laws and the history, to show how God feels, to show what God wants to do and to teach. So, when we study Hosea's sad and scandalous family history, we are not to critique it or to question it, but to see what it tells us about God's side of his relationship with us.

Hosea and his wife Gomer have a son Jezreel, who takes the name of a valley where tumultuous events had taken place. It was the site of a fine vineyard coveted by Ahab, one of the North's worst kings. His wife Jezebel provoked him to have the owner killed and to seize the vineyard himself (1 Kings 21:1-29). Later, Jezebel was killed there (2 Kings 9:30-37) by the command of King Jehu*, the bloody reformer who then massacred Ahab's entire family (2 Kings 10:1-36).

* Jehu was the only northern king who had any faith in the living God, and yet he also followed idols. God did promise to allow four generations of his descendants to reign - Jeroboam II was the next-to-last.

The site Jezreel thus has an ambiguous significance. It was the site of a great injustice, and it was the site of a mass killing. Yet in some sense justice, of a crude kind, was done there. Thus God now warns of discipline coming to the "house of Jehu" (verse 5), and yet later he will say, "great will be the day of Jezreel" (verse 10). It is a symbol of the reality, rather than the ideal, of God's relationship with his people. We struggle to grasp the truth, and we struggle to put it into practice in an appropriate way. But despite it all, God loves and cares for Gomer and Jezreel.

After the ambiguous symbol of Jezreel come two children of overt unfaithfulness (1:6-9). Jezreel came when Gomer "bore him (Hosea) a son" (verse 3); but with the next two children Gomer "conceived again" (verse 6) and "had another son" (verse 8) - that is, they were hers, but not the prophet's. Yet Hosea graciously accepted them as his own - just as God has graciously accepted so many millions of illegitimate children, including us, as his own.

The daughter is Lo-Ruhamah, whose name means "not shown mercy", "not pitied", or "not shown compassion"*. This harsh name is a living reminder to the Israelites that their idolatry and selfishness do not deserve mercy. God does promise to save Judah, but only if they allow him to save them by his own means, not by battles, swords, or other worldly methods**.

* The NIV footnote translates the name as, "not loved", which is less precise than the original meaning.

** This foreshadows the crisis described in Isaiah 7-8, when Isaiah advised Judah's King Ahaz to deal with a crisis peacefully, not by military action. Ahaz rejected this advice, leading to disastrous consequences.

Then comes the son named Lo-Ammi, or "not my people". The Israelites themselves had made this drastic declaration implicitly, through their worldly attitudes and perspectives. Even more shockingly, God declares, "I am not your God". The original Hebrew actually reads, "I am Not I Am" - to God, having his love ignored by his people means that he might as well not even exist.

Hosea's family reminds us of what God endures from humanity, even from those who believe in him. When we build our relationship with him based on our good works, when we boast about what we do for Jesus instead of humbly praising him, then we deny the primacy of his grace and we become Lo-Ruhamah. When we seek self-importance and bring worldly methods and perspectives into the church, we show our true allegiance and become Lo-Ammi, not my people.

We are not Jesus; we are not even Hosea. We are Gomer; we are Lo-Ruhamah; we are Lo-Ammi. Our pretensions and self-importance prevent us from grasping the depths of God's mercy

and love. But paradoxically, when we acknowledge our inability to do "great things", when we renounce our fleshly craving for excitement and heroic action, everything changes for the better.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How does Jezreel symbolize God's relationship with us today? Why are we, by nature, Lo-Ruhamah and Lo-Ammi? Why do those things apply to us, not merely to unbelievers? How can we learn better to accept this about ourselves? Can we reconcile God's graciousness with the family life he gave Hosea?

Great Will Be The Day (Hosea 1:10-2:1)

The sad example of Hosea's family will not be the last word*. The names of Lo-Ruhamah and Lo-Ammi proclaim what the people actually were; but God himself, in his grace, now declares them to be something better. Mercy, not sacrifice, is at the root of our relationship with God. In ourselves, we are always unworthy of being his people; but the cross has changed all that.

* In the Hebrew text of Hosea, chapter 1 ends after verse 9, with chapter 2 starting with our verse 1:10. This slight difference emphasizes the sweeping nature of the change announced by God in 1:10-2:1.

The ancient promise (Genesis 22:17 and 32:12) still holds: God's people will still be as countless as sands on the seashore (1:10-11). And they will not merely exist in numbers - they will, after all, be called children of the living God. This change is not due to their efforts or their actions, but comes by God's grace and forbearance. God's love and grace are far stronger than we realize.

We do not need to prove ourselves or to accomplish anything - we need only believe that God will forgive us: "to the man who does not work but who trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Romans 4:5). We can be hopelessly flawed like Gomer; and yet we are still righteous in his eyes as long as we seek his favor by his grace, not our goodness.

God will also, by grace, bring about a reunion between Judah and Israel - and later a reunion between Jews and Gentiles, through the gospel that breaks down all human barriers. This too is not because of our goodness, but because of our one "leader" (in Hebrew, "head"). This finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus, the head of the church. Great indeed is the "day of Jezreel".

When we see that we are Gomer, in deep need of grace; that we are Lo-Ammi, not God's people but declared to be his people; it also changes our attitudes towards our brothers and sisters (2:1). Others are not put in our lives to fulfill our dreams for the church. They are God's own people, and he will be merciful to them. Yet even when we stubbornly resist these lessons, God still loves us and accepts us. His love and grace flow abundantly, to Pharisees and prostitutes alike.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What brings about the changes described in verses 10 and 11? How much of this has to do with Hosea's lifetime, and how much of it has to do with Jesus? What lessons should Gomer, Lo-Ruhamah, and Lo-Ammi teach us?

Selected References For Studying Hosea

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- Mark Garner, *Northland Church Of Christ, March 2012*

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Notes For Week Two: Rebuke & Restoration (Hosea 2:2-2)

The book of Hosea opens with a look at the prophet's family life, which symbolizes several aspects of God's relationship with his people. The second chapter revisits the same ideas with even more vivid, detailed imagery. These verses re-emphasize God's perspective, and they illustrate both God's personal righteousness and his graciousness towards his people.

Review of Last Week's Class

By God's grace we are children of the living God (Hosea 1:1-2:1). Jesus took a key idea of the book - Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings" - to express the difference between "religious" thinking and Jesus' own perspective (Matthew 12:1-8 and 9:9-13); and he encouraged his listeners to learn what this teaching means.

Hosea lived in northern Israel during the era of the divided kingdom (Hosea 1:1). Hosea's wife and children were living illustrations of the prophet's teachings (Hosea 1:2-9). His bride Gomer was a prostitute, yet the prophet knowingly married her at God's direction. Their first son was named Jezreel, a symbol of the fallibility and weakness of God's people. Then came two illegitimate children: Lo-Ruhamah, "not shown mercy" and Lo-Ammi, "not my people". Hosea accepted these children as his own, just as God accepts anyone who turns to him.

Great will be the day when God by grace will cancel all of our unworthiness and folly (Hosea 1:10-2:1). In Hosea's day, God held out the hope of re-uniting the divided nation, while now the gospel has the power to break down all barriers. So, without doing or proving anything, we can become God's people after all. He loves us anyway; he just hopes that on occasion we will pause and reflect upon what he has done to bring us to him, rather than always focusing on ourselves.

Rebuke our Mother (Hosea 2:2-)

Continuing the family imagery from chapter 1, the prophet uses Gomer's faithlessness to parallel Israel's struggles with idolatry. The specific idols they served were merely pretexts for filling their own desires - and this is a lesson for us as well. In every era, God must patiently and graciously endure the idolatry of his people, who even at their best are lovable but very weak.

This new passage opens with the prophet appealing to his children to rebuke or contend* with their own mother, telling her for the prophet that "she is not my wife" (2:2-3). He cannot even address her directly, and he emphasizes the effect on his own identity by adding that, "I am not her husband." The graphic language in this passage calls for the unfaithful woman to be publicly shamed - the threat of nakedness also revealing her empty way of life.

* Literally, the Hebrew verb means to quarrel with or to start a dispute.

Continuing the cold and unforgiving tone, the prophet then addresses her children, the "children of adultery" (2:4-5). He (or God) intends to show no love to these children, just as their given names foretold. Although it was not the fault of these children that they were conceived in idolatrous desire, the husband's own disappointment and shame leads him to take this hard-hearted stance. It also illustrates the ways that sin damages relationships of all kinds. And it is not an arbitrary choice by God - by his nature he cannot have any other reaction to sin.

Yet all of this strong language is rhetorical, a device to make us think about what God endures in order to build a relationship with his people. He will not carry out these threats literally, nor will he permanently reject any of these persons, whether they "deserve" it or not. But we too often do not appreciate just how hard it can be for God to reconcile his desire to know us with our own inherent unworthiness. Our pride, idolatry, and pretensions make it very hard for him to allow us into his presence*. It is only because of his great love and desire to know us that he even tries.

* Under the Old Covenant, this was the essential concept behind the laws and the sacrificial system. The people knew that they had an ongoing burden of guilt for sin that required constant sacrifice. Likewise, only designated persons, who had undergone thorough cleansing, could risk being in God's direct presence.

He is in the position of a husband who loves his wife but knows she will never be completely faithful to him. He is in the position of being expected to raise his wife's illegitimate children as his own. He will ultimately show them the full measure of his love and grace anyway; but this should not lead us to underestimate just how much grace and mercy he must show in order to bring this about. There will always be a tension between God's overwhelming desire to be with us and his acute awareness of our idolatry and folly - none of which he can allow in his presence. In the end, the only way for him to resolve this dilemma was through the cross.

What God actually does, rather than carrying out any of the dire threats in the earlier verses, is to block the path of the unfaithful wife (2:6). God will deliberately cause his "wife" to endure hardships and frustrations, so that "she cannot find her way". This is an act of love, not of spite. She will realize how uncaring and unforgiving the world can be, since only then will she start to think about God. This is not a punishment - it is the start of the turnaround.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Can we ever understand how God feels towards us? How can he love us so much and yet have such an aversion to our sin? How should we respond? How do his words to the wife parallel what he says to us or does in our lives?

Transforming The Relationship (Hosea 2:1)

God loves his unfaithful people too much to give them the punishment that they, in a legal sense, deserve. And so here the prophet proclaims only the discipline that is absolutely needed to make a restored relationship possible. God would be justified by doing nothing at all, or he could also, in a sense, get what he desires by force - but he chooses a much different way.

Humility is essential in knowing God (2:7-10). The faithless wife takes a key first step, though she has only a superficial realization of her spiritual condition. God takes each person where he or she is. None of us really starts seeking God for all the "right" reasons - but it does not matter. We badly misunderstand what it is about us that God values, and what it is that makes each of us valuable and worthwhile. Worldly self-esteem is competitive, but godly self-worth comes from understanding the infinite value of each human soul, each human psyche, for its own sake.

The wife as yet only dimly realizes her need. She still sees only that her fleshly pleasures, pagan religions, and worldly ambitions do not satisfy her or make her feel safe, so she decides to return to her original husband (figuratively, to God). Like most of us, she has a great deal of difficulty in making a distinction between seeking the blessings that God provides, versus knowing the true source of life and of everything good. Such discipline as God imposes on the wife is to help her to realize this, rather than to punish her for what she has done in the past.

We too often feel satisfied merely because we identify God as being the giver of what we have. That is only the rudimentary first step towards actually knowing him - but remember that God will be extraordinarily pleased with each tiny step we make on the way to finding him.

While God very much wants to be worshiped, he also has no place for false worship - even if the false worship is offered in his name (2:11-13). Therefore God is going to call a halt to all of "her" worship - some of it based on his own Law, some of it in his name but not based on the Law, and some of it directed towards idols*. The value of worship comes strictly from the true object of worship, not from the energy, the methods, or the theology behind it.

* Although God mentions idol worship, such as burning incense to Baal, he also intends to stop their Sabbath worship and yearly festivals, which were based on the Law. The "New Moons" that he mentions are somewhere in-between - not overt idol-worship, but usually based on God in name only.

In a sense, the problem is worshipping worship rather than worshiping God. If our desire is to worship God, then we can do this without any particular format or method, and without regard to whether those around us are bored or enthusiastic. But if we desire a worship "experience" for its own sake, we inevitably have trouble distinguishing between worshiping God and worshipping idols. Neither doctrine nor enthusiasm matter in worship nearly as much as we think they do.

God's greatest desire is for his people to know him (2:14-15). The prophet symbolizes God's desire and compassion with the imagery of a husband courting his own wife, to draw her back to him after her unfaithfulness. God shows how much he loves her by lavishing special attention on her, allowing her to think that it is he who needs her, rather than the other way around.

God seeks out the love of each soul into whom he has breathed life, he allows each of us to feel special, and for all the right reasons, not for the world's competitive and selfish reasons. The value of a soul comes from its irreplaceability as a unique creation of a loving God. Salvation is neither a theological exercise nor a numbers game nor a competition. It is for each soul a story of love, estrangement, and reunion - and each soul makes its own decision as to how it shall end.

God's gracious love creates a kind of second honeymoon with his faithless wife, whose renewed condition he describes as being, "as in the day she came up out of Egypt*," recalling one of the greatest days in Israel's long history. All the conflict, the faithlessness, the suffering and discipline are all forgotten now. The reunion between a soul and God brings sudden joy, sudden hope, sudden treasure. This is equally true when a soul finds its God for the first time as it is when a struggling believer gains renewed love for his or her Creator.

* We'll see this image used in various ways throughout Hosea: see, for example, Hosea 7:11, 8:13, 9:3, 11:1, 11:5, 12:9, 12:13 and 13:4. The imagery includes the joyful departure from Egypt, the foolish longings for a return to Egypt, and the faithfulness of God in bringing them out and caring for them.

Questions for Discussion Or Study: What does the "wife" realize now, and what does she still not understand? How does she parallel us in our relationship with God? What does this imagery teach us about how God feels towards us? Does it provide any motivation to seek him? How does it change our perspective to look at things from God's viewpoint instead of our own? How does God "court" a soul?

The Relationship Restored (Hosea 2:1-23)

And so by grace the relationship between God and his people is completely restored. The restoration is founded on God's qualities alone - his grace, his wisdom, his compassion - and not

on anything that the unfaithful "wife" has done. Given the slightest chance, God will pour out his love and blessings on anyone who acknowledges him in the least.

The result of spiritual restoration includes a fresh covenant (2:16-18). It is not based on law or obligation or theology, but on relationship and Creation. The "wife" will call her "mate" (God) husband, not master* - the relationship will be based on grace and love. The new covenant also restores harmony between God, his Creation, and his people. Blame and guilt have been wiped away by grace. Coercion and aggression are also out of place in a relationship based on grace.

* Note also that the Hebrew word for "master" is the same as the name of the false god "Baal". So this also emphasizes the difference between a relationship with the living God and the worship of false gods.

When we really understand grace, it brings nothing but peace. Guilt is pointless, since we can never make up for our sins, nor does God ask us to. God's grace also teaches us to relax in our ministries, without worrying about performance or results. Whatever we know or do is a distant second to the importance of simply knowing him. When we tell others about God, remember the extraordinary steps that God has already taken to draw that soul to him. Our role is barely even necessary - God simply by grace allows us to share in the joy when someone comes to him.

The relationship is made even more intimate with a renewed betrothal* (2:19-20). Just as it is always encouraging when humans repair broken relationships, so too it is a blessing to all of us when a spiritual restoration brings someone closer to God again. Yet let us never think that we are the ones who make our relationship with God work - he is the one who makes an unconditional commitment forever, and he is the one who is always ready for us to turn to him.

* Compare this with 2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:23-25, and Revelation 19:7, 21:2, 21:9, and 22:17.

The Lord is responding to reality and to nature - God says, "I will respond*" since he is merely acting true to his own nature (2:21-23). He and his creation are in tune with each other, and he would like to incorporate the humans he has created into this same oneness. And then they too can be served by all creation**, which will respond to them just as it responds to its Creator.

* The verb can mean, "to respond" either in the sense of to answer or in the sense of to testify.

** Note also the end of verse 22 with the start of verse 23 - "Jezreel" literally means "God plants".

And so the story again ends up with Lo-Ruhamah and Lo-Ammi transformed. God loves the loveless with all his heart, and he eagerly accepts as his people those who have no claim to be his people. If we can get past our fleshly pride and our worldly craving for exalting self, then we can rejoice in realizing just how deep, how permanent, and how powerful God's grace really is.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What similarities are there between the covenant in verse 18 and the New Covenant in Jesus? Why does Hosea keep emphasizing the analogy of marriage? In what sense does God "respond" to the creation? How does Hosea 2 parallel Hosea 1? Why are there two different discussions of the same ideas?

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MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HOSEA

Notes For Week Three: Redeeming The Gilt (Hosea 1:1-11)

Hosea showed us how his own troubled family life parallels what God gives and endures in his relationship with his people. Then he used a series of vivid images to emphasize the same themes. Next, he presents the same problems in terms of a legal transaction and then he will finally present a straightforward statement of the ways that idolatry has led Israel astray.

Review of Previous Classes

We can be children of the living God despite our weakness and sin (Hosea 1:1-2:1). God desires mercy, not sacrifice. Hosea's rather sordid family life provides living examples of these ideas.

Hosea provides a second perspective on his wife's rebuke and restoration (Hosea 2:2-23). He asks his children to rebuke their mother for her idolatry, then warns his "children of adultery" that they too are unworthy. Yet this is only rhetorical, for God himself starts the turnaround.

The transformed relationship starts with discipline, to induce humility by reminding us of our dependence on God. God seeks to do away with false worship, wanting his people to focus on him and not themselves. Hosea then presents the image of a husband courting his own wife, to remind us of the great lengths that God goes to in order to help us see how much he loves us.

And so God himself will restore the relationship, by grace alone. This leads to a fresh covenant based on grace and on knowing God. There is also a renewed betrothal between God and his "bride". God portrays himself as responding to the needs of his creation - he wants himself, his creation, and his people all to be in harmony with one another.

Buying Her Back (Hosea 3:1-5)

The prophet now provides another living illustration from his personal life. His wife's adulterous and careless ways have brought her to a new low point, from which she can escape only by her husband's gracious generosity. All he asks in return is that she make one more attempt to acknowledge him, and that she try to stay with him. His own love is given unconditionally.

This chapter returns to actual events in Hosea's life, as he responds to his wife's unfaithfulness with a new outpouring of grace* (3:1-3). The third chapter again parallels the first two, making the same points in different ways and re-emphasizing the all-importance of grace. God will neither compromise his righteousness nor cease his compassionate efforts to bring us to him.

* A few commentators, uncomfortable with this extreme display of grace, prefer to see chapter 3 as Hosea's first meeting with Gomer rather than a later instance of unfaithfulness. In this case, the same points are made, but not as strongly. But since God tells Hosea to show her his love "again", this scenario is unlikely.

Though Gomer has responded to Hosea's faithful love by wandering back into adultery, God urges the prophet to love her and protect her instead of abandoning her or even disciplining her. God always loves all of us, even the most despised individuals on earth. He asks the innocent Hosea to endure this situation, as a way of teaching us the kind of thing that God gladly endures at the hands of every soul he has created, in his yearning to know each of us.

So the prophet must carry out a humiliating transaction. Not only must he accept back an unfaithful and even impenitent woman, but he must also pay* for the privilege! In return, he makes a simple request, which is not even new, for a promise of faithfulness is inherent in the wedding vows. God had already warned Hosea that Gomer would not honor her vows, but the prophet himself was expected to be faithful to this faithless woman - just as God is ever faithful, ever loving, ever forgiving, for all that he knows so well how faithless we can be at times.

* The situation suggests that Gomer had also gotten herself deep in debt, and apparently was only able to survive through continued prostitution. This is a metaphor for the ways that our idolatry of worldly things starts out by offering us pleasure of some kind, but later on controls us and dominates our lives.

Then God uses the prophet's situation to make a spiritual parallel, with a meaning on an even broader level (3:4-5). God's warning that the Israelites will "live many days without king or prince" foresees the coming period of defeat and exile for both Israel and Judah*. This will be painful and humbling, yet God knows that there can be great value in humbling experiences.

The Northern Kingdom ("Israel") would fall to Assyria in 722 BC, and the Southern Kingdom (Judah) would fall to Babylon in 586 BC, with most of the people being taken as captives back to Babylon. Many years later, God would rebuild the nation and use it to prepare the way for the Messiah.

God's people will "come trembling to the Lord", seeking God's help yet knowing now that they do not deserve it. This multi-layered prophecy has both a historical fulfillment and a spiritual fulfillment. The plans God had for Israel were important for the sake of the ancient Jews themselves, and also as a prelude to the proclamation of the gospel. But all of these events also parallel the often-troubled relationships that individual believers can have with God.

Under the Old Covenant, God was not able to have the kind of personal closeness with each Israelite that he actually desired. So the nation's overall level of faith determined how God dealt with them. But under the new covenant, "no longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Hebrews 8:11, Jeremiah 31:34). Now God courts and disciplines each individual soul.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What personal qualities does Hosea show in "buying back" his wife like this? How does God display these qualities? Why does Hosea not ask for more from his wife in return? What implications does this have in our relationship with God? Should we "come trembling to the Lord"? What might it mean?

Rejecting God (Hosea 1:1-9)

The prophet now details the ways that Israel has implicitly rejected God. He is less concerned with personal morality than with the ways that their idolatry and selfishness has harmed others. Yet even at that, God does not list these wrongs primarily in order to threaten, to punish, or to induce guilt. He would most of all like for them to realize and address the root of their troubles.

Because God, his people, and his creation are intertwined, the land itself "mourns" when God's people stray from him (4:1-3). Idolatry has consequences far beyond the ways it affects the actual idolater. Because there is no acknowledgement of God, the land is full of everything from adultery to blasphemy to violence. These sins are just symptoms - the real problem is the failure to acknowledge God, and this in spite of all kinds of outward religious and worship activity.

Whether in the ancient world or the modern world, human nature is the same. Now as then, religious humans address outward symptoms instead of dealing with real needs; now as then the

creation mourns and suffers* for human sin. Entrusting nature to humanity is another way in which God's love leads him to take risks: "What is a human that you are mindful of him ... you made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet" (Psalm 8:4, 6).

* This imagery refers both to the literal ways that human sin damages the creation and also to the more figurative sense in which God's creation has no real purpose if it is not one with God and with his people.

God is not going to try to stop or correct or punish all of the symptoms - instead he points directly to the heart of the matter, to bring out the inherent need for God that his people have forgotten. Until they grasp this, they must remain Lo-Ammi, "not my people".

God is neither arbitrary nor stubborn - by turning away, he is merely rejecting those who have already rejected him (4:4-6). His offer to return will always be open; but in the meantime, there are some implications that his people may not have thought of. Because "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), and because "there is no one righteous" (Romans 3:10, Ecclesiastes 7:20), none of us has any right to bring a charge against anyone else.

It is human nature to minimize our own sins and to magnify the sins of others. Yet it is no more appropriate for us to judge spiritual worth than it would be for Gomer to criticize Hosea for his prophetic methods. So too, the parts in the body of Christ need to support and appreciate one another, not try to boss each other around or assume spiritual authority over one another.

In Hosea's time, priests and people alike were unfit to be priests, unqualified to be mediators* and unqualified to be involved with holy things**. For us, the paradoxical parallel is that we are only able to fulfill the roles God truly intends for us when we are completely aware that we are not qualified to do so. Mercy, not sacrifice, is again the basis of it all.

* Old Covenant priests were necessary as mediators because it was so difficult to maintain even the basic level of cleanness necessary to live in God's presence and to touch holy things. In Jesus, every believer is a priest in a broader sense, being entrusted with the Holy Spirit and the holy gospel.

** Handling the holy things was an important part of the priests' responsibility, because to do so required a constant state of cleanness almost impossible to maintain by anyone not wholly devoted to the task.

To value the world's rewards above the presence of God exchanges glory for disgrace (4:7-9). Unbelievers revel in the world's pleasures instead of God's grace and love - but believers too exchange true glory for false glory when they seek God as a means to an end instead of an end in himself. "When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets ... to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full" (Matthew 6:2).

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How can the land "mourn"? What did this mean in Hosea's lifetime? What might it mean in ours? Based on Hosea, why we should refrain from accusing or judging each other. To what degree would Hosea want us to apply this? In what sense are we priests? How then do Hosea's words to the priests apply to us?

The Idolatrous Life (Hosea □:10-19)

Despite all the ways that his people have hurt and disappointed him, God understands that they are above all harming their own souls. The life of an idolater may be filled with short-term pleasures, but it is inherently empty and unfulfilling. As always, God is not primarily looking to condemn or punish. He would like very much for idolaters to turn back to him.

In the long run, following idols becomes a desperate search for satisfaction (4:10-13). After a period of pleasure or success, the idol demands more and more. Eventually nothing seems to work, because idolatry brings with it a constant desire for more and an inability to appreciate what one already has. The same thing (tangible or intangible) can be a destructive idol to one person and a spiritual blessing to another - it all has to do with attitudes and expectations*.

* Isaiah 44 provides some detailed imagery of idolatry. See also the notes from the 2008 class on Isaiah.

God is unalterably opposed to idols, yet he wishes to draw us away from them, not to punish us for following them. And instead of condemning others for their idols, which may be obvious to us, it is better to re-examine our own perspectives. Our idols can seem valuable to us, even spiritual. We usually cannot identify them by what they are as easily as we can by what they do to us. Idols produce divisiveness, critical attitudes, ingratitude, and other such bad fruit. A general sense of dissatisfaction, as Hosea describes here, is one of the tip-offs of an idol at work.

God calls for understanding of idolaters rather than irrevocable condemnation (4:14-16). "A people without understanding will come to ruin;" and when we do not understand how idolatry works, we become increasingly blind to our own idols. When we do not understand, we act and think based on emotion and self-interest instead of wisdom and self-control. It is not a noble thing to give in to rage or hatred just because the objects of our hatred or rage are "sinners".

Most idolaters are themselves victims, since they are often exploited by more experienced or proficient idolaters. Hosea specifically proclaims mercy for prostitutes because of this - he is not denying their own wrongdoing, but he knows that they are suffering even more at the hands of those who are exploiting them. This is often the case with those who arouse our anger, too.

Hosea's generation is doubly stubborn, reveling in pseudo-religious idolatry while insisting that they are really serving God. Thus, as with the faithless wife in Hosea 2, God wishes to stop their worship activities (verse 15)* to make them pause and reflect. They feel quite comfortable with what they are doing on the outside, yet much is amiss on the inside.

* For the meaning of Gilgal, see Joshua 4-5. "Beth Aven" ("House of Evil") is a sarcastic name for Bethel (literally, "House Of God"), which in Hosea's day had been turned into a site of false worship. Finally, God asks them not to swear by his name, for he knows that they have no real loyalty towards him.

If we are unable to expose our idols, we can become addicted to them (4:17-19). Hosea's contemporaries keep chasing after the very things that have brought them diminishing pleasure and security - just as today's popular idols often disappoint their most enthusiastic worshipers. This is the "whirlwind" Hosea speaks of - not so much a direct punishment from God as the grinding and inevitable loss of faith and humanity that idolaters bring upon themselves.

As for God, he will always love the idolater as much as he loves all of his weak human creations. By sharing these things, he hopes that we will realize how eagerly he wants us to turn to him anytime that we need his grace and mercy, even if we are guilty of the darkest sins.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does idolatry so often lead to dissatisfaction? Can this help us to identify our idols? Why does God want us to understand idolatry? What does he want us to know? How do idols punish those who worship them?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, March 2012
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MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HOSEA

Notes For Week Four: Let Us Acknowledge The Lord (Hosea 1:1-11)

Hosea has used several different methods to emphasize the all-important role of grace and mercy in our relationship with God. He now details some of the specific spiritual problems of his time, yet most of these are only symptoms of deeper disorders. When we have fallen into sin or idolatry, the most important thing for us to do is to acknowledge him and to accept his grace.

Review of Recent Classes

Hosea's faithless wife is rebuked but then restored (Hosea 2:2-23). God transforms broken relationships by his grace and mercy, and he calls us his people even when we do not deserve it.

Hosea's marriage is an example of redeeming the guilty (Hosea 3:1-4:19). When his wife strays into adultery, idolatry, and debt, the prophet buys her back himself. This new outpouring of grace reminds us again of how eagerly God desires to forgive us rather than to punish us. Hosea also points out further spiritual parallels, both in Israel's history and in the Messianic future.

Only by rejecting God himself can we "escape" his grace. Yet this is still all too common, and the prophet describes the land itself in mourning because the people have chosen not to know God. They are unfit to be priests (mediators), and they need to be warned not to accuse each other. Yet God does not need to send special punishment for idolaters, because the idolatrous life is not rewarding. Idolaters spend much of their time desperately seeking satisfaction, as their idols fail to deliver lasting peace and security. They create a whirlwind of self-punishment.

Hosea shows us the great strength of God's grace, his desire to know us, and his eagerness to show mercy. The wisdom, sacrifice, patience, and love he has put into the relationship far eclipse our own meager efforts to learn and serve. Although our idolatry and self-centeredness make it difficult for God, he does not ask for punishment - just a little humility and gratitude.

The Obstacle of Pride (Hosea 1:1-11)

Pride, stubbornness, and arrogance prevent the Israelites of Hosea's day from returning to God. Because of their pride, they cannot see their need; because of their stubbornness, they cannot admit their mistakes and weaknesses. God will forgive pride just as willingly as he forgives any other sin; but pride can make it especially difficult for us to seek and accept his grace.

God sees that most Israelites of Hosea's generation are not going to return to him (5:1-5). God knows their hearts and their lives, just as he knows ours. When he says, "their deeds do not permit them" to return, he is merely acknowledging the hardness of their hearts. This is part of their "spirit of prostitution", which has expressed itself in the injustice and oppression that have become rooted in their attitudes and practices*.

* Mizpah and Tabor (see verse 1) were two common places of assembly. As implied by the phrase "this judgment is against you", these assemblies had become more noted for injustice than for worship.

Hosea describes a combination of stumbling and stubbornness - of which the latter is more dangerous spiritually. The people have lost all coherent sense of meaning in their lives, but the real problem is their stubbornness insistence that all is well.

So the Lord has withdrawn from them - not angrily or in pique, but sadly and reluctantly (5:6-7). For the time being, their rejection of his mercy has made it impossible for him to overlook their idolatry and sin. So when they seek him now - that is, when they come seeking his blessings instead of his presence - they will not find him. They have become Lo-Ammi once again.

The sad irony is that the people will now be devoured (spiritually degraded and left unfulfilled) by their own religious festivals*. All this time God has been mercifully supporting them and helping them - but they have ascribed their blessings to their own outward actions and to the false security that they find in their spiritual identity. Only when God reluctantly withdraws his presence will they learn just how much grace God has been showing them.

* The New Moon festivals were originally based on the Feast Of Trumpets from the Levitical law. But it had become something much different (and much more frequent) than the holy day described in the law. The festival was nominally observed in the name of God, but most of the activities were of human origin.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does God know (or at least fear) that many of his people will never return to him? If he wants them to seek him, why does he withdraw himself from them? What should we learn from this? Is this a lesson about human nature or about God? In what sense will they be "devoured" by their festivals?

Illness & Healing (Hosea 8:1)

Israel and Judah are spiritually ill, yet neither recognizes their true spiritual needs. It is human nature to seek worldly solutions even when the problem is spiritual. It is a spiritual tragedy that unbelievers and believers alike turn away from God's grace and mercy just when they need these qualities the most. Trying to prove that we are righteous is the least healthy thing to do.

To "sound the trumpet" warns of danger - both physical and spiritual (5:8-12). This warning of a day of reckoning comes in the midst of an attack that Israel and Aram launched against Judah in about 735 BC*. The prophet uses this outward turmoil as a metaphor for inner spiritual struggles. The military conflict between two halves of God's people is very sad; yet it is merely the inevitable result of the injustice** and oppression that have been rampant in both nations.

* This same war is the setting of Isaiah 7-12, which includes some of Isaiah's best-known prophecies. Gibeah, Ramoth, and Bethel (sarcastically called Beth Aven - see notes on Hosea 4:15) were in the territory of Benjamin, right along the border between Judah and Israel. Benjamin would bear the brunt of this senseless war, but all of the people were already suffering inwardly because of their spiritual weaknesses.

** Note the criticism of Judah's leaders in verse 10 - moving boundary stones was a notorious practice used by dishonest land-owners to increase their holdings (see Proverbs 22:28 and 23:10).

God warns them that he could become like a moth or a rot to them. Normally his presence blesses even the sinful; but as Hosea has previously warned, there are times when human pride and stubbornness make it impossible for him to continue pouring out grace - and then it can be dangerous to be in his presence. Compare Hosea 5:12 with James's warning to the uncaring rich: "Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes ... (James 5:1-2).

The sick, of course, should seek a doctor - but this takes humility (5:13-15). During the war of 735 BC, both halves of Israel hoped for support from the powerful Assyrian Empire. Hosea criticizes the northern kingdom (Israel or Ephraim) for this, just as Isaiah criticized Judah. Historically, the decision to get Assyria interested in their affairs backfired badly for both Israel and Judah*. Worldly solutions always have consequences - even if the short-term results seem positive, the use of worldly methods and priorities always results in spiritual damage.

* The Assyrians would decide to attack and dismantle the northern kingdom in 722 BC, and soon afterwards they would attack and nearly conquer Judah. A large section of Isaiah concerns the crisis that arose in 701 BC when Judah barely escaped from Assyria (see especially Isaiah 36-37).

We too are often tempted by the world's methods and logic. We see churches attain numerical growth or political influence, and we become envious. We become frustrated with our brothers and sisters for not changing as quickly as we think they should, and we become judgmental. We become overly attached to an unyielding view of the church, and we become critical. All of these things can provoke us to settle for a worldly solution that promises to fulfill our immediate desire, but that carries long-term spiritual risks. Yet God will still love us anyway!

God created us knowing that we would often stray. He does not ask us to be perfect - he asks only that we admit our guilt and our need for God. Worldly solutions fulfill fleshly desires, but only God and his grace can truly heal us. Hosea uses a new image of warning, that of a lion destroying its prey, to warn of what it would be like to force God to turn away from them.

God waits to see whether his people will give up trying to justify themselves. As soon as they earnestly seek God, he will be waiting for them, no questions asked and no excuses needed. We should remember the same lesson. When we make mistakes, a worldly response just makes the problem worse. We can turn to God any time, for any reason. His grace is more powerful than we shall ever realize, and he is more eager to pour out his grace than we can ever understand.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What warnings does Hosea give in this passage? What is the purpose of the warnings? How does the historical situation illustrate the spiritual principles involved? How do the mistakes of Israel and Judah teach us? Why does God withdraw himself? What does it take for him to come back?

☐s *Surely* ☐s *The Sun Rises (Hosea ☐:1-☐)*

Despite these severe words, God's love for his people is as strong as ever. He asks only that they return to him and acknowledge him, rather than relying on either heroics or self-punishment. If they accept his grace on his terms, there is no end to the healing, nourishing, and compassion that God will give them. God will always seek reconciliation and restoration, if only we let him.

Hosea makes the curious statement that God has injured us, but he himself will heal us (6:1-3). God longs to heal; but the prophet also wants us to understand that our own self-will can hinder or prevent God from healing us. Indeed, his presence, such a blessing to the humble and poor in spirit, can become an affliction to the self-important or those who oppress others.

Hosea's promise that, "on the third day* he will restore us" has significance on multiple levels. In his own day, it was a simple assurance that God will always be ready to heal and restore, even when we are fully responsible for our afflictions. To future generations of Israel, it was a

promise that periods of oppression or captivity will always end. And finally, it is a striking look forward to the final healing that Jesus brought through the cross and the resurrection**.

* The expression "after two days ... on the third day" is a common poetical device, and the two days/three days do not refer to two different events. Compare with expressions in Proverbs such as "There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand" (Proverbs 30:18) or with Amos's recurrent use of the expression "For three sins of ... even for four ..." (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6).

** Hosea 6:2 is sometimes cited in non-inspired writings by early Christians as an example of a prophecy of the resurrection. It is not, though, quoted as such in the New Testament itself.

To those who acknowledge God and seek his presence, he becomes like the rains that water the earth - a source of nourishment and of life itself. This adds a new dimension to Hosea's recurring theme of God's overflowing grace. We also need God to sustain all of our needs every moment of life; and he gladly provides for human needs, even for the evil and hateful. It is another reminder that God's compassion for humanity is far deeper than we can ever appreciate.

It is also an appeal for us simple to turn to him with whatever we need, no matter how 'unworthy' we may feel - "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

In view of his longing for them and their own stubbornness, God rhetorically asks his people, "what can I do with you?" (6:4-6). Human love - even from caring and sincere humans - is like a mist, temporary and fragile. This is not a condemnation. God knows how hard it is for us to be unselfish, how hard it is for us to look beyond the moment, and how hard it is for us to value the spiritual above the physical. He made us this way, and he loves us this way. He treasures those moments when we can look beyond ourselves and can see him for who he is.

So, when his judgments 'flash like lightning,' we should understand why it happens. God longs to have us in his presence; yet his presence is double-edged, a blessing to the clean and a hazard to the unclean. Those who live in his presence will feel more keenly the hurts of the world and the needs of the world, even as we also sense more keenly God's grace, mercy, and compassion.

And so we come to God's reminder that, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Grace is not just a new 'standard' or a change of policy. It is an inherent part of God's nature that permeates everything about him, everything about his creation, and everything he does in his relationship with us.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why would God injure us and then heal us? Do we understand what these things mean? What does Hosea 6:2 actually promise? To what degree might it anticipate the gospel? What reasons does Hosea give us to come to God? What obstacles does he describe? How can we better understand what Hosea 6:6 means, now that we have read the first few chapters of the book?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, March 2012

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MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HOSEA

Notes For Week Five: I Long To Redeem The (Hosea 3:1-4:19)

God always desires to see every soul come to him and live in his presence. Neither folly nor evil ever eliminates someone's chance of redemption. Let our own pride can prevent God from giving us the grace he longs to pour out. Moreover, we are inherently inclined to be just as receptive to worldly influences as we are to God's efforts to communicate his love to us.

Review of Recent Classes

God's eagerness to redeem the guilty is a major emphasis in Hosea (Hosea 3:1-4:19). When the prophet's wife wanders off into adultery and debt, the prophet himself graciously buys her back.

Hosea does not call us to be flawless, but rather to acknowledge the Lord (Hosea 5:1-6:6). Pride is a major obstacle, since it prevents us from seeing our need for God. So when God says that Israel will not return, he is ready to take his people back, but he knows how proud and stubborn they are. Thus they will be "devoured" by their own worship and festivals - they are seeking God for the wrong reasons; and even their religious observances will push him farther away.

We need to accept our spiritual illness in order to seek the right kind of healing. Hosea's warning to, "sound the trumpet" describes the senseless war between Israel and Judah (about 735 BC - see last week's notes) as merely the result of spiritual problems that have long been present. The people should seek a doctor, yet instead they seek worldly solutions through force and politics.

But "as surely as the sun rises", God always wants us to live in his grace and in his presence. Hosea constantly reminds us of God's longing to heal; and he proclaims God's perspective: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings."

Whenever I Try ... (Hosea 6:7-8:2)

We rarely consider how persistently God tries to teach us and to show us compassion. When we are pre-occupied with our own agendas, he always hopes that we will pause to remember him. When we are in the midst of sin, he always seeks to heal us. He always knows everything about us, and he does not deceive himself about our nature - yet he longs for our souls all the same.

After his emphatic reminder of God's eagerness to show mercy (see 6:6), the prophet reminds the people that they are the ones who have broken the covenant (6:7-11a). Yet this neither shocks nor angers God - though certainly he regrets it and mourns over it - because in this they are only like Adam* himself. It is human nature that makes it very hard for us to live up to our promises and agreements. God knew this when he created us; and instead of becoming furious over our broken promises, he rejoices over even the briefest moments when we do remain true to him.

* The phrase "like Adam" can also simply mean, "like man" (man as in "humanity"). Alternatively, because some commentators are uncomfortable with the fact that the man Adam had no formalized covenant with God, they try to associate this verse with an obscure location named "Adam". But it is part of the prophet's message that the problem with human nature goes deeper than any formal law or contract.

Worse, though, is the way that the Israelites are lying in ambush for each other. The prophet describes two kinds of sneak attacks, one illegal and one legal, but both displeasing to God. It was an unfortunate fact of life in Hosea's day that worshipers travelling to places like Gilead or Shechem had to worry about attacks from bands of thieves who infested the roads to those places, knowing that the various assemblies would bring travelers their way. But what happened at their places of religious assembly, led by "bands of priests", was sometimes even worse.

For the religious leaders to use their positions for personal profit, to accumulate power, or to boost their egos was every bit as dishonest and exploitative as what the armed robbers did. Yet even today we do not always see exploitation and oppression for what they really are, if the oppressors and exploiters are clever enough to use God or religion as their pretext. For many centuries, ambitious persons have known that using God or religion is one of the most effective ways to manipulate the emotions, thoughts, and actions of other persons.

So there is an appointed "harvest", and it includes Judah too*. The image of a harvest, usually positive, is used ironically here to draw attention to the Israelites' unrealistic views of themselves and unrealistic expectations of God - which were caused in turn by their pride and stubbornness. Note also that this fearsome "harvest" is not really a deliberate punishment devised by God - in this case, it is the natural result of their own folly and sin. They have deliberately invited Assyrian armies to get involved in their affairs; and this will be a big part of their future troubles.

* Although it is mostly of importance for understanding how Hosea's message applied to the people of his own day, it is worth noting how often he balances his criticisms of the north (Israel or Ephraim or Samaria) with equal criticisms of the south (Judah). Hosea does not choose sides in the conflict between brothers.

Persistence in ignoring God's compassion is more troublesome than sin is in itself (6:11b-7:2). Here is God's dilemma: the conflict between his longing to know us, in which he is willing to do anything to bring us close to him, and his righteousness, which means he cannot simply overlook our sin and idolatry. God always knows everything about us - this is not a stern warning, but rather a reminder not to try to deceive either him or ourselves. God always remembers* - this too is not a warning, but a reminder that he is ever aware of our need for his grace.

* This was true in a stronger sense in Hosea's day, since the Levitical sacrifices could only atone for sin, not obtain permanent forgiveness.

Fortunately, God's grace takes precedence over his righteousness, as long as we humbly allow it to. "Dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (1 John 2:1).

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why is it so hard for us to remain faithful? How does God feel about this? Do believers "ambush" others? Can we avoid it? Why does God remind us that he knows everything? Can we become more certain of his mercy?

Rejoicing In Worldliness (Hosea 13:3-10)

All of us sin, act foolishly, and have mistaken beliefs. None of this keeps God from loving us or desiring to know us - but our denial of these truths does create a real obstacle to knowing God. God has gone to great lengths to provide mercy and forgiveness - we must merely recognize our need for them. These next images remind us of the folly of living for our own desires.

Hosea depicts unrepentant sinners as being "as hot as an oven", growing ever more devoted to their idols and ever less aware of God's presence (7:3-7). Three times the prophet uses an oven* to symbolize those who delight in their fleshly desires. It is one thing to sin, and another to revel in it. Hosea describes a society in which certain sins have become considered fashionable - and in fact this is true of just about any era. The only difference is which sins are at a given time seen for what they are, and which sins are considered "in" for the time being.

* In Scripture, this imagery of an oven to symbolize out-of-control sin is unique to Hosea.

This fleshly "fellowship" described by the prophet is a problem not because of any one specific sin, but because the people reinforce each other's stubborn pride instead of encouraging one another to call out to God. In verse 7, God describes himself as patiently waiting for his people - some of them, any of them - to call out to him. But it is all too easy for even believers to fuel selfish passions in one another instead of drawing one another closer to God.

The details differ, but we too can whip up the wrong kind of passions in one another when we get off-track and indulge in human religion instead of God. When we indulge personal preferences in worship, the craving for outward results, partisan political loyalties, or any other such thing, these will inflame the wrong kind of passions and lead us away from God's presence.

Hosea continues to remind us of the danger of being unaware of our weakness (7:8-10). He describes Ephraim (Israel) as "half-cooked*", over-cooked on one side and raw on the other side. They have focused too much on their human desires and not enough on knowing God.

* Hosea uses the idea somewhat differently from our term "half-baked". We normally use "half-baked" to mean something ill-considered or not carefully thought through.

They are denying the obvious. Like an aging man unwilling to accept that he is no longer in his youth, the Israelites pretend that they are spiritually well. They have checked everything off of their lists, and they feel good about themselves, despite the obvious signs that they have lost track of God. The prophet does not expect them to change everything, but just to acknowledge their need for grace. He does not ask them to punish themselves, but just to search for God.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does Hosea mean with his image of an oven? What should we learn from this imagery? What kinds of fleshly passions are we most vulnerable to? What weaknesses are we most likely to deny or ignore? How does God want us to respond to this?

Catching Doves (Hosea 7:11-13)

Hosea describes God's people as doves, because of our inherent vulnerability. Left to ourselves, we are just as likely to be influenced by the world as we are to be influenced by God. God calls us actively to seek him so that his presence can be a blessing to us instead of a threat. Then we, in turn, can become a blessing to other weak souls who are seeking God.

Ephraim (or Israel) is like a dove in a number of respects, some of them unexpected (7:11-13). The people have a kind of innocence, but it is a risky form of innocence. As the prophet describes them, they are easily deceived, with a tendency to respond to any inducement, whether

godly or worldly*. This is true of human nature in general, in any era - our inclination to pursue the immediate and outward makes us inherently prone to be easily manipulated or persuaded. In fact, those who consider themselves the best-educated or most sophisticated are even more vulnerable to this, because they find it so easy to come up with fancy-sounding rationalizations.

* When verse 11 speaks of Ephraim "now calling to Egypt, now turning to Assyria," Hosea is referring to the practice of both sides during the war of trying to seek worldly alliances with any available country.

God can catch birds, so from time to time he uses a "net" to round us up and remind us to seek him instead of worldly things (compare the imagery in Hosea 2:6-7). God's longing for us is stronger and more sincere than the world's desire to have us; yet for this reason God's actions are less drastic and less violent. He does not want to force us to know him or to do what is right - this would make our relationship with him meaningless. The world, on the other hand, just wants to get its way in the short term - hence its methods are crude but forceful.

We are usually so focused on ourselves - what we "have to do," what we "cannot do," what we desire - that we miss this entire aspect of God's nature. Hosea keeps pointing out to us that God will never stop loving us and will never stop trying to bring us to him - even when this requires him to do things that by our definition would not be rational. He pursues his desire for us to know him with a combination of undying affection, unlimited mercy, and unselfish gentleness.

The prophet cautions Israel about being "ridiculed in Egypt" (7:14-16). Egypt* was the site of their bondage long ago, and the Egyptians had seen God make a drastic display of his power to free his people from oppression. How cynically humorous the Egyptians would find it to realize that it was now God's people who had turned away from trusting God and in their worldliness had begun to oppress each other.

* In the second half of Hosea, the prophet will use Egypt several times as a symbol of their past slavery and as a reminder of their persistent desire - figurative or literal - to return to Egypt. See Hosea 8:13, 9:3, 9:6, 11:1 (also a prophecy about Jesus), 11:5, 11:11, 12:9, 12:13, and 13:4.

Hosea's words to them are instructive to us as well. They have a tendency to wail, to complain, or to lament their misfortunes instead of simply crying out in humility for God's forgiveness and grace. They are ignoring God's guidance, and relying on worldly methods and ideas. These things, more than their specific sins, make them a bad example to Egypt (to the world). The prophet consistently reminds them that they can come to God anytime for a fresh start. He won't force them to do this, and he won't force us - he always stands patiently waiting.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Hosea use the image of a dove for God's people? How is it appropriate for us? Is there any way for us to be less susceptible to worldly influences? Is it possible for us better to understand God's longing to know us? What is the difference between calling out to God versus mere complaining?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, April 2012

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MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HOSEA

Notes For Week Six: The Wind & The Whirlwind (Hosea 1:1-11)

To a large extent, God gives us what we ask for. If we desire to know God and to receive his mercy and forgiveness, then he gives us these things. If we desire to satisfy our fleshly desires, then in a sense he lets us have this too - he allows us to see the natural result of living this way. He will not force us to accept his will, yet we must accept responsibility for our decisions.

Review of The First Half of Hosea

We are children of the living God by grace and mercy alone, not because we have earned it or can earn it (Hosea 1:1-2:1). Hosea's unfaithful wife and her children by other fathers provide living examples of the kind of broken relationships that result from sin but that can be healed by God's mercy. Hosea rebukes his wife but then acts to restore the relationship (Hosea 2:2-23).

God redeems the guilty (Hosea 3:1-4:19). Hosea pours out grace on his unfaithful wife, paying off her debts and buying her back out of bondage. God too is always ready to take us back, and he pays the price himself for our mistakes. He does not ask us to wallow in guilt or even to prove ourselves worthy, but only "let us acknowledge the Lord" (Hosea 5:1-6:6). God declares, "I desire mercy not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings" (6:6).

God longs to redeem his people (Hosea 6:7-7:16). But whenever he tries to get closer to us, we try to justify ourselves by works, we ignore our need for his grace, and we insist on doing things our way. Human nature is too weak to live up to the covenant. Worse, the prophet compares the sneak attacks that thieves made on travelling worshippers with the spiritual sneak attacks made by religious leaders who exploit their positions to manipulate others. God's dilemma is that he knows all our sins, and in his righteousness cannot ignore it - yet he loves us dearly anyway.

God accepts our weakness and does not condemn us, but he cautions us against rejoicing in worldliness. Humans can provoke each other into sin and increasing hardness, becoming "as hot as an oven" and losing all self-control and self-awareness. Hosea cautions us not to be unaware of our weakness, because the tendency to let sin get out of control applies to "inner" sins such as prejudice, hatred, and materialism just as much as it does to the more obvious outward offenses.

The first half of Hosea concludes with an image of God catching doves to protect them spiritually. Like doves, we have a certain risky kind of innocence that makes us just as likely to respond to worldly influences as we are to respond to godly influences. Yet God does not share our judgmental attitudes - he just wants to bring us back safely into his presence. He does not ask us to wail about our sins, but hopes instead that we will humbly cry out to him.

The first half of the book contrasts the gentle will of God with the hardened stubbornness of human self-will. Instead of trying so hard to get things our way and to force our ways on others, let us merely rejoice in God's mercy. "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

The Hovering Eagle (Hosea 8:1-3)

Because Ephraim (Israel) and Judah have both insisted on going to war and have indulged in worldly political games, they have stored up a great deal of trouble for themselves. The prophet critiques them for their faithlessness and their rebellion against God; but he also points out that God will not need to devise a punishment for them. They have created it themselves.

Hosea now proclaims another trumpet blast - this time not heralding a war, but announcing a spiritual reckoning (8:1). There is an eagle* "over the house of the Lord", hovering in a threatening manner. This has happened because of the broken covenant, the people's inability to solve their problems in a godly manner instead of resorting to force and deception.

* The bird could also be a vulture. Some eagles known to ancient residents of this area were scavengers rather than predators. Thus it is slightly ambiguous whether the image represents an eagle about to attack God's people, or an eagle-vulture ready to scavenge the remains after the nation is ravaged from without.

Historically, this refers to the post-war situation in which Assyria is a looming, threatening presence in the affairs of the region. The final doom of the northern kingdom is near, though no one yet realizes this. The southern kingdom also will soon face some dark times because of the Assyrians. Out of compassion, God and his prophet try to alert them to the "eagle*" hovering over them. This reiterates of a long-established warning that goes back to Deuteronomy 28:49.

* There is also a sadly ironic contrast between this "eagle" and the use of an eagle as a positive symbol in passages such as Exodus 19:4.

The Israelites try to acknowledge God (8:2-3). They do this quite literally, calling out "O our God, we acknowledge you!" But they do not really understand what God is looking for. When Hosea encourages us to 'acknowledge God', he is not talking about a verbal formula, or indeed anything necessarily spoken at all. God hopes that we will acknowledge him in our hearts, by developing humility and graciousness in response to the grace we have been given.

Hosea's contemporaries have not done this. They will be pursued by an enemy (historically, Assyria; there are also spiritual parallels) since they have implicitly rejected God by rejecting the things he values. "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Outward proclamations of faith, no matter how loud or enthusiastic, do not in themselves satisfy God. He knows when we have accepted his grace in our hearts, and when we have not.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What kind of 'eagle' does Hosea warn about? What parallels might we experience? Why is their acknowledgment of God not satisfactory to God? What does this tell us about God's nature? How should we acknowledge God?

□ings & Idols (Hosea 8:□-□)

Many of the kings and leaders of both halves of Israel were worldly persons who obtained their positions by force and used their positions for selfish gain. The prophet parallels this with the emptiness of the idols that they have made for themselves. Both idols and worldly leaders offer a sense of false security, but both of them tend to let us down when we need help the most.

Kings and princes, silver and gold were some of the favorite things of Hosea's audience (8:4). But they are not among the things God highly values. The people are proud of the kings and princes who exert force and violence, but God does not even know them*. He means, of course, that they do not know him, though they make a great show of being leaders of God's people.

* The NIV translates this verse as saying that the people chose leaders without God's permission, but the original Hebrew literally says that it was done without God's knowledge. The implication is that the people are so distant from God's presence that they make decisions as if he could not know what they were doing.

They are also impressed with their idols of silver and gold, but their devotion to idols will lead to their destruction. They do not really believe that calves and other images are actual, living gods. Idol worship is a way of worshiping self. Idols merely provide a widely-accepted pretext to pursue things that the flesh desires. The destructive power of idols does not come from incorrect beliefs. It is the way that idols direct worship in spiritually unhealthy directions. Even if idols fulfill our initial expectations, worshiping them always pushes us away from God's presence.

So Hosea's implied call to clear out the idols* is necessary if the Israelites are to draw closer to God's presence again (8:5-6). He mentions calf idols since Israeli had a peculiar tendency** to make idols in that form, besides worshiping other idols that their neighbors had devised. Besides the golden calf in the desert (Exodus 32), the northern Israelites who split their half of the nation off from Judah chose a calf idol as one of their symbols of independence (1 Kings 12:25-33).

* The NIV translates this as direct call to cast them out. But the Hebrew literally says only that, "your idol is rejected (or is offensive)" - making the call to discard it implicit rather than direct.

** These images of 'calves' were probably young bulls, rather than baby cattle. The choice of a young bull would indicate a desired connection with unrestrained virility and power.

These calf-idols are literal, but Hosea's call extends to symbolic idols too - even those that bring results or self-importance. Idols do not always have obvious outward drawbacks. But when God says, "do not have any other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3), he does not merely mean not to put something 'above' or 'ahead of' him - he means, "do not have any other gods in my presence".

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What is the difference between Israel's feelings about their rulers and their wealth, and God's feelings about them? Are these things bad in themselves? What does God's perspective teach us? Why does God not want idols in his presence? How does this explain why he wants us to do away with them?

Sowing & Reaping (Hosea 8: 7-10)

The Scriptures often use the image of sowing and reaping to illustrate the ways that everything tends to have natural consequences. Here, Hosea combines this imagery with some other images that describe the human tendency towards self-destruction. It is by God's grace that he restrains us just often enough and just firmly enough to keep us from spiritual destruction.

Israel's idolatry and stubbornness will lead to a harvest of trouble (8:7-8). Hosea uses the natural process of sowing and reaping to emphasize the natural consequences of ignoring God and turning away from his presence. They have sown the wind by stirring things up that can only have negative long-term consequences. Without God's presence they are at the world's mercy. Historically, the nation would "reap the whirlwind" when foreign nations turned from potential allies to oppressors. Thematically, the image cautions us against the temptation to use God as a means or pretext to pursue short-term goals instead of remaining focused on his grace and mercy.

God is not vindictive, but compassionate. He is not threatening to come up with some awful punishment; he is cautioning them against the natural consequences of their actions. "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his

sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life." (Galatians 6:7-8)

Substituting ritual or performance for God's presence and grace makes us like useless grain. There may be plenty of stalks, but they do not produce anything meaningful to God. So Israel will soon be swallowed up among the nations. This will happen literally when they are attacked, but it has already happened spiritually. Their acknowledgement of God is outward only.

So God must gather some wild donkeys (8:9-10). The comparison with wild donkeys* means that Israel is acting contrary to its own true nature by selling itself to worldly influences instead of seeking God's presence. We were created in the image of God, and we have a strong need and desire for his presence. Our cravings for sensual thrills, outward results, forcing others to do our will, and so many other ills, are merely distortions of our true need for God himself.

* The animal referenced here is the onager or Asian wild donkey (or Asian wild ass). Today it is an endangered species, but it was common in Hosea's era. Onagers have close relationships with one another, but they are one of the few species of the horse family that firmly resist any attempt to domesticate them.

God's promise to gather them together has a multiple meaning. God wants his people to be united, but here there is another dimension, for they will be gathered not in their own home but in a foreign land. They will learn to appreciate God's presence all over again - the coming exile will be a natural result of their own mistakes and also what they need to rebuild spiritually.

There is a sad irony in the coming oppression at the hands of the "mighty king" (the king of Assyria, and later the king of Babylon). Anytime they wish, they can be close to a truly mighty and much greater king. God also keeps calling us and offering his grace to us, unconditionally. There is no reason for us to wander off on our own and sell ourselves to the world. And even if we have done this, God is ready any time to take us back.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How would the imagery of sowing and reaping apply in our own experience? Does it refer to knowing God, to our actions, or to both? What does the image teach us about God's nature? What should we learn from the imagery of wild donkeys? How does God want Israel to respond? How should we?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, April 2012

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MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HOSEA

Notes For Week Seven: Graves In The Desert (Hosea 8:11-13)

Through Hosea, God relentlessly challenges Israel to give up its idols, its violence, its immorality, and its oppressive ways. God does not speak against these sins out of bitterness or resentment, but because Israel means so much to him. Likewise, God's call for us to be purified is not an arbitrary command. It is part of his constant desire to have us live in his presence.

Review

In Hosea 1-7 we repeatedly see God's willingness to forgive and to show mercy. The most basic lesson from Hosea is that God's grace and desire to know us are stronger than we can ever know.

One of Hosea's best-known images is the wind and the whirlwind (Hosea 8:1-10). He warns of a hovering eagle*, a symbol of looming disaster brought on by Israel's violence and idolatry. So the Israelites acknowledge God - or do they? They mechanically and ritualistically acknowledge God with their mouths, but still do not understand who he is or what he considers important.

* Either to swoop down and destroy, or perhaps just to pick apart their remains. See last week's notes.

The people of Hosea's day loved kings and idols, but God does not know their kings, and he rejects their idols. They should discard them for their own good. Their golden calves (young bulls) were literal, symbols of unrestrained fleshly power. But God also appeals to us to discard our symbolic or intangible idols - anything that we look to for things that only God can provide.

So Hosea presents his image of sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind. Idolatry, immorality, and violence are bringing Israel and Judah a harvest of trouble from the foreign powers whose help they foolishly sought during their war. God will not have to devise a special punishment, since they have caused it themselves. God compares them with wild donkeys, as a way of emphasizing that they have forsaken their own true nature. They will serve the "mighty king" of Assyria instead of the truly mighty king who has always longed for them to know him.

Altars For Sinning (Hosea 8:11-13)

Ephraim (Israel) and Judah have both relied on their festivals and other worship activities to retain God's favor in spite of their idolatry, wars, and other spiritual problems. Hosea now explains why this is so inadequate. God's interest is not in their outward actions, but in their hearts. He knows that, for all of the outward activity, they have forgotten who God really is.

Human religion may accomplish fleshly goals, but it just doesn't work in helping us to know God (8:11-13). Hosea's contemporaries have built plenty of altars, only to defile them* by making sacrifices without a real awareness of God's priorities or perspective. They come simply to fulfill an outward obligation, instead of having any real desire to encounter God's presence.

* The Hebrew text of verse 11-12 is ambiguous, and the various versions translate it differently. The NIV translation might be the cleanest, and it is probably the one that makes most sense out of Hosea's message: "though Ephraim built many altars for sin offerings, they have become altars for sinning."

Coming into God's presence is certainly a great blessing, but it is also a responsibility. We too should not take it casually. Instead of judging unbelievers, we should purify our own hearts.

When we present an example to the world of personal purity combined with a gracious, forgiving attitude towards others, we can much better help them to see God's own nature.

To make things worse, when God wrote to Israel to communicate his will they treated his words also as something mechanical rather than something living and personal. They "regarded them as something alien" in the sense that they forced God's Word into their own perspectives and agendas, instead of humbly allowing their own ideas and beliefs to be challenged and changed.

Hosea's warning of a return to Egypt will prove true in a limited literal sense during the future times of exile*, but its real meaning is the spiritual bondage into which the Israelites have already fallen. When the Exodus generation faced trouble, it was common for many of the people to long for a return to Egypt (see, for example, Exodus 14:11-12, 16:3, 17:3, and Numbers 11:4-6, 14:2-4, 20:3-5, 21:4-5), with the crude sense of false security that it gave them.

* When Assyria conquered Ephraim (Israel) in 722 BC, and especially when Babylon conquered Judah in 586 BC, both times large groups of refugees ended up in Egypt to flee from captivity. Even the prophet Jeremiah was part of one of these groups, being taken there against his will (Jeremiah 42-44).

In Hosea and elsewhere in the Old Testament, the desire to return to Egypt is used as a symbol for the part of us that fears spiritual truth and that prefers to return to safe worldly beliefs. Hosea will frequently use Egypt as a symbol in the last part of the book.

What Israel forgot is not a fact or a law or a method, but their Maker and Lord (8:14). They have wandered from his presence and their hearts have drifted towards other things; yet they do not see this because their outward actions seem full of religious fervor. They are busy with projects such as building palaces for their leaders and fortified towns for themselves. But because they have forgotten their Creator, God warns of doom for the things they have made with their hands.

What was wrong with their cities, that God wanted to destroy them? Nothing - and nothing is wrong with our cities, possessions, or pastimes. If we live by grace and humility, then these things are blessings from a loving God. But we can make them unclean by adopting worldly perspectives and attitudes. Levitical law reminded Israel to keep the unclean from contact with the holy, and God's presence also relentlessly exposes our impurities and idols - we must choose between shattering our idols or hardening our hearts to God and drifting away from him.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How could an altar be defiled (in the old law)? Are there parallels for us? How is God's presence a blessing? How is it a responsibility? Why does he call believers higher than unbelievers? Was this true in Hosea's time? In what sense has Israel forgotten God? Describe the consequences in your own words.

Not Like The Other Nations (Hosea 9:1-3)

God chose Israel and called it to be different from the other nations. Today he calls not nations, but souls, to be different from the rest of humanity through the gospel of Jesus. In both cases, there are temptations to be like the rest of the world; and in both cases the spiritual risk of turning away from God is greater for the faithful than it is for those who have not known him.

"Do not rejoice, O Israel" seems harsh until we recall its spiritual disorders (9:1-3). The people have been unfaithful, committing spiritual prostitution. Outwardly they worship regularly, but worldly attitudes dominate their thinking - and they are proud of it. God loves to see humans happy, when it is because he has blessed them - but that is not why Israel is rejoicing.

God calls us to a different concept of joy. The worldly rejoice in bending others to their will, in being proven right and seeing others proven wrong, in feeling superior to others. This is so ingrained that believers and churches can fall into the same mentality. This is human nature, and it only becomes a serious problem when we don't realize or accept our weaknesses.

When God warns the Israelites that they will not remain in their homeland, when they are eating unclean food in Assyria, it will only reflect their inward desire to be like other nations in all the wrong ways, not wanting to live up to God's calling to live in purity, grace, and equality.

They partially accept the prophet's warnings, but they respond only by offering further sacrifices, which again prove ineffective (9:4). They still have a hard time accepting that God wants to base his relationship with us on his mercy and our acceptance of it, rather than on the sacrifices and activities we perform. Because they do not grasp this, their sacrifices will merely be like the bread of mourners - bringing uncleanness* instead of purification.

* The bread used by mourners would be unclean because of its proximity to the dead, and it would render unclean anyone else who partook of it. (And persons in proximity to a dead body would require certain cleansings or sacrifices before becoming clean.)

God warns them to keep their unclean sacrifices out of the temple, a holy place. The basic principles of holiness and cleanness cautioned the people not to take dangerous liberties in God's presence. It can also help us to know God better if we take the time to understand holiness. Holiness does not come from our actions or even our character. It comes from being given to God, from belonging to God. Cleanness arises from purification or sacrifice, but holiness cannot be attained by human means. It must come from God, and we must accept it by grace.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does God not want Israel to rejoice? What are good reasons for rejoicing? Are there wrong kinds of rejoicing we should avoid? Why did it not help when they responded to God's rebuke by offering sacrifices? What should we learn from this? How can we benefit from better understanding what holiness is?

Will gy^t Gather The (Hosea 9: 9-10)

In the days of reckoning that Israel has brought upon itself, the people will find themselves scattered - some will become refugees and others will be taken captive. This is not for any particular outward sin as much as it is because their entire perspective and priorities have become so ungodly. Yet even amidst his disappointment, God reminisces about better times.

Hosea describes a future when the festivals will be silent, and the land will be taken over by briars and thorns* (9:5-6). Those who escape destruction will be on their way back to Egypt, either literally as refugees or figuratively as captives of a new nation. Their own homeland would be sparsely populated for some time to come**, as is depicted in the prophet's imagery of their silver and their palaces being overtaken by briars and other wild growth. God's presence is gone, for the people themselves have valued worldly things above knowing God.

* This is a common type of image used by the prophets to indicate either the literal abandonment of the land or else a spiritual regression. Both are applicable here.

** The fate of northern Israel after the Assyrian conquest of 722 BC and the fate of Judah after the Babylonian conquest of 586 BC were similar, though different in details. See, for example, 2 Kings 17:24-41 and 25:22-26. Jeremiah 40-43 also gives an extended firsthand account of Judah after Jerusalem fell.

Though outwardly things seem relatively normal, the people's perspectives and attitudes have become so mixed up that any true prophet of God is considered a fool* (9:7-9). The more they hear the truth through prophets like Hosea, the more they become hostile to the truth. In their minds, they have tried to listen, even heeding his most important message by "acknowledging God" (8:2-3), only to find that God meant something different. They continually put their faith in outward 'worship' activity, only to find themselves drifting farther from God's presence.

* Some commentators have pointed out that the Hebrew text of these verses can be interpreted in a different way. It could be understood as Hosea criticizing the other 'prophets' of his day for being foolish and for being hostile to the truth. In this case, of course, the applications for us would also be different.

But instead of issuing an unconditional condemnation, God reminisces and thinks about what made Israel dear to him in the first place (9:10). Hosea uses the imagery of finding grapes - a nourishing treat - in a desert otherwise devoid of life. This is his way of expressing that believers are a rare treasure to God. God pours out so much love on the world, and gets so little understanding or appreciation in return, that even the tiniest gesture of genuine faith means a lot to him. We do not need to do anything to impress him with our faith - what means the most to God is our humble appreciation and acknowledgement of his own wonderful qualities.

This is what makes idolatry and spiritual adultery, symbolized here by what happened at Baal Peor*, such a spiritual tragedy. It is not disobedience of a specific law *per se* that makes God unhappy, nor is it the failure to make full use of opportunities to serve him. What hurts God more than anything is when we simply ignore his presence because we are fixated on ourselves. It hurts him, rather than pleasing him, when we divide over secondary issues. It hurts him, rather than pleasing him, when we condemn others for their sin instead of showing them grace.

* This refers to the incidents described in Numbers 25, when the Israelites in the desert became infatuated with Moabite women, and besides committing rampant immorality they enthusiastically offered sacrifices to their false gods. This drastic rejection of God's presence led to some very sad results.

This is because above all God wants us all to live in his presence. It honors God's presence both when we humbly accept his grace and also when we graciously show others mercy and grace. God is not gloomily reminiscing about a mythical lost past that can never be recaptured - he is reminding us all of what matters most to him, and of what is also most beneficial to us, in order that we can all share in the great hope that he offers for the future.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why is it appropriate for the land to be left desolate and overrun by briars? What applications should we make? Is there a message to us in Hosea's warning that the prophet is considered a fool? Why does God reminisce about how much Israel means to him? What does this tell us about how he feels about us?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, April 2012

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MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HOSEA

Notes For Week Eight: A Fallen People In A Fallen World (Hosea 11:1-11)

This next passage is one of the most somber and severe portions of Hosea, full of warning and criticism without any promises or comfort to bring relief. It is also loaded with imagery of every kind, and the imagery is not always consistent from one line to the next. God is openly expressing his hurt and disappointment, without any attempt to pretend that he doesn't care.

Review

The image of the wind and the whirlwind (Hosea 8:1-10) shows that sin brings its own punishment by hindering God's presence. In God's affection for the Israelites, he considered them like grapes in the desert (8:11-9:10), yet they misunderstood what he valued about them.

Their very altars of worship became altars for sinning. Their sacrifices pushed God away, because they relied on outward worship to justify themselves even as they practiced violence and idolatry. Israel forgot the presence of God, not his laws. God did not want Israel to be like other nations, rejoicing in worldly success at the expense of others. He calls us also to a different concept of joy, based on grace and peace instead of on earthly things. We too could stand to understand holiness much better. Holiness is not an aura that surrounds those accomplished in fleshly righteousness; it is the simple status of belonging to God, available freely to all by grace.

The question in Hosea's day was whether Egypt would (figuratively) gather the Israelites once more, because of their longing for worldly things, or whether the Israelites would humble themselves and live by grace. The Israelites were so confident in their own righteousness that they considered prophets like Hosea to be fools*. But God recalls how much it has meant to him on those rare occasions when Israel truly lived closely with him. He is not merely being wistful about a mythical lost past - he is reminding them that all they need to do is to come back to him.

* Some commentators interpret 9:7-8 differently. See last week's notes.

God neither asks nor expects us to be perfect. He calls us by grace and asks for us to respond in humility. He hopes that we will strive to purify ourselves from violence, immorality, prejudice, idolatry, and greed; yet he calls us in turn to show grace to those who remain impure. Whatever their offenses may be, they need God more than they need judgment or punishment.

Becoming Wanderers (Hosea 9:11-14)

Ephraim (Israel) and Judah have become spiritual wanderers, seeking to be like the pagan nations because they were not content to live in God's presence. Soon also, they will literally begin to wander among the nations, deprived of their own homeland. Notice that God's viewpoint and the prophet's own words get mingled together, as they express regret and warning.

Ephraim's glory will fly away (9:11-14). Israel is worried about fleshly glory - the strength of the nation, material prosperity, an identity as a "religious" people. But Israel's real glory is none of these things: it is the glory of God's presence* - and they have turned away from it. The time is coming when their fleshly glory will also disappear, but this is secondary to their real loss.

* See, for example, Exodus 24:15-17, Leviticus 9:23, 1 Samuel 4:21-22, Isaiah 60:19, and Ezekiel 10:3-19.

The prophet and God - their points of view are deliberately mixed together - foresee an Israel bereaved of children and deprived of descendants. Future (to Hosea) generations will be driven from the land; but the spiritual application is even sadder. In Israel, each generation passed along the teachings of God to a new generation - but they have done this in a shallow literal sense, passing along rituals and laws but manifestly failing to be an example of God's values.

Hosea finds himself wanting to see them fall (verse 14). The prophet's family experiences have taught him to identify closely with God's feelings, and he is distressed at what the people have done to God. Yet there is a higher motivation too - for any children or descendants will be born into a spiritual morass that could consume them too. So God would ultimately allow the pagan nations to take them captive, since only captivity could give a new generation a clean start.

Israel was planted in a pleasant place (literally, Canaan; figuratively, God's presence). But the Israelites became as discontented as any group of pagans. It was not enough for them to belong to God, and their violence and materialism implicitly denied God's presence. God compares Ephraim to the doomed city of Tyre*, both blessed with many advantages but both devoted to worldly things. But Ephraim (and Judah) lived in God's presence, and were still dissatisfied. Once again, Hosea cautions us that God's presence brings us greater responsibility, not less.

* Tyre was a seaport in Phoenicia, just north of Israel (Ephraim). It was legendary in ancient times for its wealth and for its impregnability. But Tyre would fall to Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC.

This is why God and the prophet (their thoughts are mixed together) hated the Israelites when they assembled to worship at the great shrine at Gilgal (9:15-17). Gilgal was originally the site of some of Israel's most positive memories*, but over the years it became a commercialized site of commerce and false worship. It is now a shrine for sinfulness, because whatever else the people had in their minds when they went to Gilgal, it was not God's presence.

* Gilgal was the site of the memorial to the miraculous crossing of the Jordan (Joshua 4:19-24), the place where Joshua led a mass circumcision as part of a spiritual renewal (Joshua 5:2-12), the location where Saul's kingship was confirmed and finally fully accepted by the nation (1 Samuel 11:14-15), and the place where David was re-acknowledged as king after the rebellion led by Absalom (2 Samuel 19:15ff).

Israel is (figuratively and spiritually) full of withered roots and fruitless plants. Their spiritual promise has withered because they wandered from the presence of God. They have produced results but not good fruit, for they valued worldly things and also sought them by worldly means such as aggression and exploitation. Hosea draws a somber conclusion: God will reject them. In truth, of course, they have rejected God. Their outward disobedience is only a symptom. God himself is only accepting with sadness the decision his people have made.

Questions for Discussion Or Study: Why didn't Israel understand true glory? Can we make the same mistake? What are the consequences for us? Why was Israel not satisfied with its "pleasant place"? Can we make the same mistake? What was wrong at Gilgal? Does God really "hate" and "reject" them? Does he ever "hate" and "reject" us?

The Senselessness of Spiritual Adultery (Hosea 10:1-)

Israel had no reason to be discontented or to wander from God's presence, for he had supplied the people with all they needed. But their hearts craved worldly things instead of spiritual blessings, so they worshiped idols just as enthusiastically as they 'worshiped' God. Even when they suffered the negative consequences of spiritual adultery, they did not understand or change.

The imagery of Israel as a spreading vine is echoed in some well-known Scriptures (10:1-2). Jesus likely had this passage in mind in urging his disciples to remain in the true vine (John 15). Isaiah 5, known as "the song of the vineyard", provides a warning similar to Hosea's. The prophets use this imagery to depict a people that are fruitful but clueless, while Jesus uses the imagery to try to prevent his disciples from making the mistakes that Israel made.

Israel enjoyed many times of prosperity and success, often when the people were barely faithful, if at all. Because they were fruitful but unwise, they worshiped both the living God and pagan gods indiscriminately. Since they could not distinguish one from the other, they built altar upon altar and worship site upon worship site. They lost track of their altars as places to meet God, focusing instead on their own acts of 'worship'. It was only a small step from there to the construction of places overtly used for pagan worship, such as standing stones or pillars*.

* These were vertical structures 'honoring' Canaanite gods of fertility. These and other structures such as Asherah poles were often overtly sexual in nature, since the worship of Canaanite gods often involved ritualized or organized immorality.

The problem with their false worship was not so much that it broke some rules, but that the spirit of false worship led naturally to false oaths and false, perverted justice (10:3-4). Although Hosea previously had cause to reprove the people for idolizing their 'strong' kings, now the people chant, "we have no king"; for they never really respected their own rulers even when they did the people's bidding. These fallen souls view the world only in terms of what they can get from it, and their views of everything and everyone are altered accordingly.

The imagery of poisonous weeds symbolizes the way that the institutions of the land have turned into vehicles for oppressing the needy and for serving the interests of the wealthy and powerful. This is hardly unique to Hosea's own time and place; indeed it is hard to find a time and place in human society of which this is not true. But it is much sadder when God's name is used to justify oppressive practices. Yet it is all a mere reflection of being a fallen people in a fallen world.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How was Israel a vine? Is there any connection with the true vine (Jesus) in John 15? What can we learn from the imagery? Why did Israel end up building so many sites of pagan worship? Was this their original intention? Do we have similar problems? How could their false worship lead to injustice?

False Fear & Godly Fear (Hosea 10:□-8)

The Israelites sense that something is wrong, and that they are in danger - but once again their perspective is distorted. They have a false, worldly fear that they may lose their outward prosperity and their idols; but they are unconcerned about straying from God's presence. And so, when the worst comes, they will experience fleshly despair instead of spiritual understanding.

Hosea illuminates an odd characteristic of this fallen people: their feeling of protectiveness for their idols (10:5-6). They don't want anything to happen to their precious calf-gods, yet in their false loyalty they do not draw the obvious conclusion: if their idols were real gods, they wouldn't need any protection. It is human nature to be protective of our idols to the point of irrationality. Humans in our society cannot bear to hear criticisms of their favorite sports teams, celebrities, political figures, cultural preoccupations, or other such things. In themselves, these are mostly harmless; but when we overreact to criticism of them, it means we have turned them into idols.

Ephraim's idols of gold and silver will become a tribute* for the "great king" - the king of Assyria. Again there is the sad irony that they did not acknowledge the great king in heaven, and

are oppressed by a lesser earthly king, unworthy of the false admiration they granted him. The king of Assyria looked impressive from a human point of view, but he was a common thug. Like most earthly strong men, he used his fleshly power to intimidate and destroy. Yahweh God, on the other hand, holds all the power in the universe yet uses it very sparingly and constructively.

* "Tribute" is an ancient euphemism for payment (money, material goods, or slaves) that a stronger nation extorted or took by force from a weaker nation.

Idolatry and worldly values ultimately lead to despair, as is illustrated by the prophet's memorable imagery of the people calling out, "fall on us!" to the mountains and hills (10:7-8). He also depicts Ephraim (or Samaria*) floating away like a twig on the water. The Israelites defined their identity in terms of national strength and material prosperity. But worldly identity is inherently fragile, no matter how it appears. An identity defined only in terms of knowing God holds inherent strength - no matter how ethereal or fragile that seems to the worldly.

* Samaria was the capital city of the Northern Kingdom (Israel or Ephraim). The Samaritans did not yet exist in Hosea's lifetime, so when he refers to "Samaria", he means Israel (Ephraim).

As in Hosea 9:6, the prophet describes thorns and thistles taking over the high places*, the sites of enthusiastic but pointless worship that were such a chronic disappointment to God. Once again, this imagery combines a warning about the future physical desolation of the country with a statement about the spiritual abandonment and deterioration that has already taken place.

* The "high places" were a frequent target of the prophets, especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel. They were altars or shrines built on elevated ground and used for a variety of religious activities, both for Canaanite gods and (in name only) for God. Commentators often describe such observances as "syncretistic", meaning a worship of multiple religions without regard to which of them may actually be true.

Hosea depicts Israel calling out to the mountains, in physical fear and spiritual despair. This is similar to the ways Hosea 10:8 is quoted by Jesus (Luke 23:28-31) and John (Revelation 6:15-17)*. Yet in all three instances the emphasis is not on the physical disasters involved. The focus is on the lack of hope that sets in whenever we stray from God's presence. We can see this easily in our own time and place as well. Even in our so-called "Christian nation" it takes very little to make despair and fear set in - and in turn for these to produce anger, hatred, and prejudice.

* In Luke, Jesus passes the mourners on the way to the cross, and foretells the future fall of Jerusalem. In Revelation, this is at the opening of the sixth seal, unleashing earthquakes and other calamities.

Can we learn something positive from these bleak verses? They show us how important it is to remain in God's presence and in his grace. God critiques them not to crush them but to explain how so many persons end up in a state of spiritual desperation. The prevention and the antidote are the same: not methods, not doctrines, not activity, but only God's pure presence, pure grace, and pure mercy. Ultimately, God would offer these things to all of us through the cross.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why do the people fear for the fate of their idols? What should we learn from this? What parallels to their high places might we have? Why do the people end up wanting the mountains and hills to fall on them? What lessons do we learn here about God's nature and God's presence?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, April 2012

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MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HOSEA

Notes For Week Nine: Called Out Of Egypt (Hosea 1:1-11:1)

Both God and his prophet Hosea openly address the rampant idolatry, immorality, violence, and other sins in Israel. But they offer a response far different from the way that worldly persons - even most religious persons - respond to the world's sins and problems. Everything God teaches us comes from his compassion and even his rebukes are meant not to harm us but to heal us.

Review of Recent Classes

To God, believers are like grapes in the desert (Hosea 8:11-9:10). The comparatively rare moments when someone truly acknowledges God, and truly recognizes the value of his presence, makes up for all the patience and grace that God must expend because of humanity's sins.

We are a fallen people in a fallen world - and when we understand this, it helps us draw closer to God (Hosea 9:11-10:8). The Israelites of Hosea's day had become spiritual wanderers, who strayed from God's presence and lost the true glory of knowing God. Their religious activities were enthusiastic but empty, turning places like Gilgal into "shrines for sinfulness". The coming exile in foreign lands would merely be a physical echo of the spiritual reality.

God emphasizes the senselessness of their spiritual adultery, not to hurt them but to call them back. Israel was planted by grace as a fruitful, spreading vine; yet over time the people took their blessings for granted and pursued worldly agendas. Their worship intermingled acts done in the name of the living God with acts overtly celebrating pagan false gods - and their false worship quickly lead to false justice, with the land becoming full of injustice and oppression.

They had a false fear for their worldly standing instead of the godly fear that protects us from spiritual harm. Like every generation, they were protective of their idols, not realizing that this exposed the idols' emptiness. So in times of trouble they had only fear, not hope. In their spiritual despair they call out to the hills to, "fall on us!" - a portrait grimly echoed in Luke 23:30 and Revelation 6:16. All of these Scriptures are intended not as threats, but as compassionate reminders that only the presence of the living God can truly sustain us in every trial of life.

Heifer Gone Astray (Hosea 10:9-12)

To God, it is more important to understand the problem and to solve it than it is to punish sin or error. He will use discipline only when it is unavoidable. And so he presents yet another image of his relationship with Israel, this time representing his people as a once-contented cow that has gone badly astray - yet that can still come back to her master any time she wishes.

Israel's problems have been ongoing "since the days of Gibeah" (10:9-10). This is not literal, since their problems go back even farther, but the reference to Gibeah deliberately recalls some nauseating events. The sequence of incidents that started at Gibeah (see Judges 19-21) included murder, gang rape, mutilation of the dead, civil war, and mass abduction. It is at first reading a seemingly senseless passage of Scripture*, yet it contains a key point Hosea emphasizes now.

* This passage is a favorite of some atheist commentators, who claim it as an example of the Bible's poor moral standards because of its depiction of violence against women, homosexuality, and other such things.

The point of the revolting Gibeah narrative in Judges is to illustrate what happens when we withdraw from God's presence. Both then and now, God's presence in our world protects us from the worst of our human nature. In ancient Israel, the sacrificial system allowed God to maintain a limited but steady presence, and so Israel was generally spared from the worst of the kinds of horrors that went on elsewhere in the ancient world. But, as in the Gibeah events, when idolatry and pride pushed God's presence away the consequences were quite visible*.

* Consider also the troublesome question of why God allows so many awful things to happen - God's presence probably prevents far more horrors from happening; and we see only a small proportion of the bad things that would happen if human nature were not continually restrained by God's grace and compassion.

Returning to Hosea's time, the prophet accuses the people of being guilty of a double sin. While he does not explain exactly what this means*, the implication is that they have compounded their sins by 'remaining at Gibeah', that is, by adding stubbornness and pride to their original offenses, and implicitly rejecting God's grace. Because God is so gracious and eager to forgive, it is not our specific sins *per se* that pushes God away from us - it is our defensiveness and pride that hinders his presence, by rejecting the grace that is essential to any relationship with our Creator.

* Because of this, some commentators prefer to see verse 10 as merely promising "double punishment" for Israel's sin, instead of trying to interpret the phrase "double sin". But see also the notes to verse 13.

So when Hosea returns to imagery of plowing and sowing, the focus is on knowing God and on how our attitudes and actions affect our relationship with God (10:11-12). He describes Israel in earlier times as a trained (domesticated) heifer*, contented and in a healthy relationship with her master. The heifer is pulling a threshing sledge to provide useful work for her owner, and in turn her owner is observing the law** by allowing the cow to nibble as much grain as she wishes to.

* A heifer is a (female) cow that has not yet had her first calf - an image of youth, potential, and innocence.

** Deuteronomy 25:4 required farmers to do this as a gesture of compassion and appreciation to the animals who did their work. Later, Paul applied this to humans in 1 Corinthians 9:9 and 1 Timothy 5:18.

The image describes God's ideal relationship with his people in any era. Israel had a special role in the ancient world, and believers in Jesus have a special role today. In both cases, God calls simply for humility, gratitude, and grace. He calls us to purify ourselves - not to prove we are worthy of him but to present the world with an example of gracious living. "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?" (Matthew 5:13)

The call to sow righteousness is not so much a "command" as a personal appeal from God to accept his blessings by grace and serve him in humble gratitude. Hosea appeals to the people to "break up your unplowed ground", that is, to make a fresh start. We too can have a fresh start with God any time that we wish, no matter how badly we may have strayed. Our acceptance does not rest on our goodness or accomplishments, but on God's compassion and mercy.

The Israelites Of Hosea's generation cannot undo their sins, and they cannot make up for them. But they can simply "seek the Lord until he comes." God stands ready to take them back into his presence at any moment, if only they will realize their need for his grace. And so once again Hosea anticipates the gospel's call: "let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Hosea refer to Gibeah? What should Christians learn from the horrible events at Gibeah? How are we like a heifer? Can we return to this state after we stray or sin? How do we "'break up your unplowed ground"?

Misguided Sowing & Misguided Faith (Hosea 10:13-14)

Hosea's generation had indeed been busy sowing seed, and in their own way they had plenty of faith - but their sowing and their faith were both misguided. Everyone is sowing something, and everyone has faith in something. It is merely human nature to become so busy with our worldly affairs and our religious activities that we lose sight of our original motivations and perspectives.

Israel started as the contented heifer that Hosea has described, but then made a mistake - in fact a whole series of mistakes that compounded themselves (10:13). Not content with the simple but powerful blessings that come from knowing God, Israel began to be tempted by worldly things, and thus they planted and sowed bad seed. Hosea has already taught us that when we sow the wind we reap the whirlwind - and this is what will happen, as long as we understand this principle spiritually and not in a crass materialistic sense.

The Israelites have planted wickedness (idolatry, immorality, and violence), and will eat the fruit of deception. They have often deceived others, yet most of all they have deceived themselves. They have sacrificed closeness with God and healthy relationships with each other to pursue worldly gains of dubious value. God let them have many of the things they craved; but they were not satisfied, and instead of realizing their mistake they continued to fight. Many worldly persons get what they strive for, only to find that it merely produces insecurity and new cravings.

This is another form of "double sin", since they pursued the wrong things and used sinful methods to get them. Their faith in fleshly power, and their use of force and deception, pushed them even farther away from God. The desire for wealth or fame or other worldly treasures is not the problem in itself - the real problem comes when we turn to worldly means to get them. We ought instead simply to share our desires with God, and then allow him to decide which things to give us by grace and which things would be unwise for us to have.

In this case, to the spiritual consequences will also be added - much later - disastrous outward consequences (10:14-15). The roar of battle, which once excited them and attracted them, is not always so thrilling. In days to come, Israel will find itself on the other end of oppression and atrocities*. God will not enjoy this, and Israel's oppressors will face their own judgment; but God will have to allow it to happen because Israel has insisted on living outside of his presence.

* This would be especially true when the Assyrians conquered northern Israel in 722 BC. The Assyrians enthusiastically invented and practiced horrifying means of torture, rape, and humiliation, in addition to killing or enslaving large numbers of their conquered victims.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What forms of deception had the Israelites practiced? What 'fruit' did they bear? What does God want us to learn from this? Is there a positive way to deal with our own desires for worldly things? Are there times when our own desires can be fulfilled but still harm us? Can we prevent this?

When Israel Was □ Child (Hosea 11:1-□)

God again returns to the basis of his relationship with Israel. If the Israelites realize what they once had, then they can return to God's presence any time that they wish to. The same principles have parallels in our own relationship with God. Each of us, as a soul, has been called out of the "Egypt" of the world, and each of us has been offered God's cords of kindness and ties of love.

God "called my son" from Egypt on several levels (11:1-2). The "out of Egypt" concept applies on a historical level, a Messianic level, and a spiritual level. Hosea's audience most clearly understood the historical level, since the exodus from Egypt was one historical event that Israel never lost sight of. But they often lost sight of their ongoing need for God's providence and grace. The prophet's repeated mentions of Egypt are designed to call attention to this.

The Messianic parallel is emphasized in Matthew 2:13-15*. When Herod the Great was trying to kill the newborn Messiah, an angel directed Joseph to take his family to Egypt for safety; then, when Herod died, God called the family back to Judea (Matthew 2:19-23). God could easily have protected his only begotten Son in some other way, but the family's sojourn in Egypt was a deliberate echo of the ancient stay in Egypt, emphasizing the deeper spiritual needs that Jesus the Messiah would fulfill. The historical and Messianic applications also remind us of the spiritual parallels, for we have all been called out of the "Egypt" of worldly desires, by God's grace.

* The Messianic foretelling is deliberate in Hosea, as the reference to Israel as God's "son" in Hosea 11:1 is very unusual. Israel is otherwise invariably portrayed figuratively as female. The only other exception in the Old Testament is in Exodus 4:21-23, which also contains a deliberate reason for the male imagery.

But the more God called Israel, the more they took him for granted and began to feel self-sufficient. As Hosea repeatedly emphasizes, all God asks is that they stay close to him and remain humbly in his grace. But by turning to idols, by ascribing their blessings to idols or to their own goodness or achievements, they implicitly returned to the spiritual slavery of Egypt.

God taught his people to walk, and they and we are still - and shall always be - learning to walk spiritually (11:3-4). God's way of leading is to take us by the hand, to lead us personally, by helping us to know him and nurture a relationship with him. Whatever laws or warnings or sacrifices he sometimes uses are always and only incidental to his main priority of knowing him.

But because God usually chooses the subtle and personal over the overt and forceful, "they did not realize it was I" who healed them of their sin and provided them with the things they needed. God so often allows us to ignore him and forget him, without punishment or even rebuke, because he does not wish to force either himself or his presence or his blessings on us. He does so much for us, and in return only asks - or indeed merely hopes - "that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27).

God hopes that his 'heifer', after straying and tasting the fruits of worldly living, will return to the true security and contentment of living in his presence. He does use us a yoke to keep us close to him, but it is an easy yoke, put in place with cords of kindness and ties of love. His Son assures us: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30).

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does God use the idea of "out of Egypt" in so many different ways? What should this image mean to us? In what ways do we need to learn to walk? How can we remember to acknowledge God more often? What kind of "yoke" does Jesus place on us? How is it held in place, in practical terms?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, April 2012

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MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HOSEA

Notes For Week Ten: Ho 11:1-12:1

For all of God's distress over the idolatry and other sins that his people have indulged in, there is no possible way that he can just abandon them. They may push him away themselves, but he will never leave them. He may have to allow them to undergo severe discipline, but he will always be there, ready to take them back to his heart as soon as they desire it.

Review of Recent Classes

To God, believers are like grapes in the desert (Hosea 8:11-9:10) - the few humans who acknowledge God make up for all of those who don't. All of us belong to a fallen people in a fallen world; yet when we understand this, it can help us to draw closer to God (Hosea 9:11-10:8). God doesn't expect us to be perfect - he will supply the grace if we humbly trust him.

God called his people out of Egypt, historically and spiritually (Hosea 10:9-11:4). Israel was a contented heifer, doing useful work and treated well, but went astray in search of something better. It is a double sin to indulge in idolatry and immorality and then deny the need for mercy. Using the image of plowing and sowing, Hosea calls God's people simply to make a fresh start.

But Israel's sowing was misguided, for they pursued worldly things instead of God's presence; and their faith was misguided, as it rested on things of the world and their religious observances, not on God's compassion and mercy. They willfully pursued worldly goals by worldly means, pushing God's presence away and leading to unpleasant spiritual and historical consequences.

When Israel was a child, God called the nation out of bondage in Egypt and into the Promised Land. He also called his only-begotten Son Jesus from safe-keeping in Egypt. And spiritually he calls every soul to escape from the slavery of sin in the "Egypt" of the world. God helps each of us to learn to walk spiritually, not by iron rules or threats but by cords of kindness and ties of love. The world uses crass and manipulative methods, and too often we respond eagerly to them. But God will remain patient, merciful, and compassionate as he waits on each one of us.

God's Compassion Is Aroused (Hosea 11:1-9)

God has no illusions about his people's nature or their behavior. He has endured countless acts of idolatry, immorality, and violence from them. His righteous nature is constantly distressed, and his presence must often withdraw in the face of their blatant sins. But the strongest emotion of all is his love and affection, even towards the most sinful and foolish of humans.

God's people can seem determined to turn away from his presence (11:5-7), even when he shows the most grace and love: "the more I called Israel, the further they went from me" (see verse 2). God's call and his methods are subtle and quiet, yet human nature prefers the loud and the overt. In the power politics that Ephraim and Judah have been practicing, both sought alliance with the rival powers Egypt and Assyria*. This 'choice' pre-occupied their leaders, but the real question now is whether they will end up as refugees in Egypt or slaves in Assyria (or Babylon).

* Verse 5 has been translated in a number of different ways because of the odd placement of the word "not" in the original Hebrew. Literally it reads, "they will not return to Egypt", but this does not fit the overall context. The NIV's, "will they not return to Egypt" keeps the literal meaning and puts it in context.

The distance they have strayed from God is emphasized by Hosea's statement that even when they call out to God, addressing him as the Most High and other fine-sounding titles, they do not exalt him* in their hearts. This is the problem that Hosea has repeatedly addressed (for example, in 8:2-3) - they keep thinking that God will accept an enthusiastic or well-performed ritual or sacrifice in lieu of truly acknowledging him by valuing what he values.

* The NIV's translation of this verse, "Even if they call to the Most High, he will by no means exalt them," is an anomaly. All other major translations translate the verse to say something along the lines of, 'even when they call to the Most High, they do not exalt him.'

Yet whenever God contemplates the possibility of withdrawing from his people forever, his heart is changed (11:8-9). As fearful as God's wrath is when unleashed, he has emotions even stronger than anger - and these emotions are the ones that save us.

Our human nature makes it difficult for us to control our emotions - and most of the time we do not even try. But "I Am God and not man" - Yahweh the living God can and does allow the gracious side of his nature to restrain his wrath. Indeed, at any given moment he is restraining his wrath to the benefit of sinning believers and sinning unbelievers alike. If we just allow God the chance, then his grace and compassion will rule our relationship with him.

We can all learn from God's priorities. Some believers think too highly of themselves, foolishly considering that correct beliefs or righteous actions give them a superior standing with God. But only God's grace and love give us a truly secure standing with God. Conversely, many believers are tormented by the worry that they have not done enough, that they may hold erroneous beliefs, or that they may have done something that makes it impossible for God to forgive them. For such struggling believers, there is also only one true remedy - God's grace and compassion.

What God values about you is your soul, your consciousness that can choose to acknowledge him or not. You are never spiritually inferior or superior to any human who has ever lived.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Do we know what, specifically, it means to turn away from God? Why do humans so persistently do so? Why does God allow his grace to triumph over his wrath? What should this tell us about our relationship with him? Are there things we should do or believe differently as a result?

They Will Come Trembling (Hosea 11:10-12:2)

God can reconcile his righteous nature with his overpowering desire to keep his people close to him - but the tension between the two sometimes causes some sparks. If we wish to know God, then we have no alternative but to acknowledge both his amazing grace and our deep dependence on it. We can only remain in his presence by staying humbly dependent on his mercy.

Because God's people strayed from his presence, he must "roar like a lion*" to call them back (11:10-11). They will come trembling, not because God wishes to hurt them, but because they themselves so badly misunderstand God's nature. He only seems like a frightening predator because their sin has separated them from God. In reality, he is trying as always to be gracious.

* When a lion is used symbolically in the Scriptures, it is usually as a symbol of danger, rather than authority or strength *per se*. See, for example, Numbers 23:24 and 24:9, Job 10:16, Psalms 7:2, 10:9, and 22:13, Proverbs 19:12 and 20:2 (but see 28:1, which is an exception), Isaiah 15:9 and 31:4, and Hosea 5:14.

When God's people hear the lion's roar, they will come like birds and doves, fearful and uncertain, from their places of captivity in Egypt and Assyria. But this time the lion has called them not to destroy them but to settle them in new homes. God never wanted to harm them - they brought most of their troubles on themselves through idolatry and other blunders.

This is both historical and spiritual. It describes the historical sequence of captivity and return* that would later take place, but more importantly it describes the spiritual experience of believers who stray. Our fleshly nature responds to the realization of its sins by putting even more distance between itself and God, from fear of punishment. But if we can get past our negative expectations of God (and the foolish misrepresentations of God we so often encounter), we see how graciously, lovingly, and eagerly he takes us back.

* After the final fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, for a while neither Israel nor Judah existed as a nation. But in 536 BC the process of returning to Judea began, eventually resulting in the nation being re-established.

God's dilemma is that his own righteous nature requires that there be a cost to uncleanness and sin (11:12-12:2). It is not a question of punishment or of vengeful false 'justice', but rather the natural consequence of God's own nature, which prevents him from having fellowship with uncleanness. The unclean cannot come into the presence of the holy without drastic results. And so cleansing must be made. Ultimately this dilemma was resolved once for all through the cross.

Moving from the glorious - if imposing - nature of God back to the reality of this world, we are reminded that even God's own people can be deceitful and unruly when they are guided by fleshly passions and loyalties. Hosea depicts them foolishly pursuing the east wind, indulging in pursuits that are both pointless and dangerous*, especially their attempts to use the more powerful nations of Assyria and Egypt to their own advantage. Note that God never rebukes these pagan nations for being what they are - his reproofs are for his own people, who should know better than to play games with such dangerous playmates.

* Since the desert was to the east of the entire nation, any east wind was invariably hot, uncomfortable, and often dangerous. No one would voluntarily remain exposed to it.

When Christians today use politics or force or money or guilt to try to get their way, they are making the same mistakes that Hosea warns about. Too often, so-called Christians simply join the pagan world as one more group that uses aggression to pursue a self-interested agenda under the guise of self-righteousness. The worldly do not need to be forced to change; they need to see the presence of God. Sinners and pagans do not need to be told that they are condemned; they need to see that God values grace and mercy more than correctness and punishment.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: In what ways is God really like a lion? In what ways is he only apparently like a lion because of our misconceptions? How can we help one another see God more accurately? Why does Hosea so persistently rebuke Israel for its interactions with Assyria and Egypt? Could there have been positive ways to interact with these countries? What lessons should we learn from this?

Straying & Returning (Hosea 12:3-8)

Israel's history and spiritual condition parallels the life of their patriarch Jacob, who embodied both the best and the worst of human nature. Our lives too combine a genuine faith with some excruciating mistakes and misunderstandings. It would take any honest human a lifetime to unravel and correct all of his/her sins and wrong beliefs - fortunately, God does not ask for this.

A simple history lesson describes the typical strengths and weaknesses of God's people (12:3-5). From the time he left the womb, Jacob grasped for everything he could get in this world*, and as a man he even contended with God**. This is just human nature - even those closest to God will still have fleshly characteristics while in this life. Historically, Israel often paralleled these qualities of their namesake patriarch; and spiritually, believers have always had to contend with the tension between their fleshly desires and their spiritual needs.

* His birth name Jacob commemorated the fact that he came out of the womb grasping his twin brother's heel, symbolic of his persistent desire to have what belonged to Esau (see Genesis 25:24-26).

** He was named Israel after wrestling with an angel and demanding a blessing (Genesis 32:22-32).

But whatever other qualities Jacob had or lacked, he talked with God: God was real to Jacob, Jacob truly acknowledged God's presence, he conversed with God. Even his contentions with God showed that God was real to him. This is the one thing God most values in those who seek him, above morality and above doctrine and above ministry and above accomplishments.

Talking with God, and being with God, is the one thing that characterizes the Abrahams, the Jacobs, the Davids, whom God lavishes with grace, love, and blessings despite their most horrendous sins. And it is the one thing that we can all give to God - it takes no talent or learning and does not require us to live in any particular time or place. It is the one thing God most wants, and it also shows his absolute fairness.

And so Hosea repeats the simple request for Israel to "return to your God", to acknowledge him not in word but in truth (12:6-8). To "wait for your God always" was a difficult challenge for ancient Israel, and it is also difficult for today's Israel, the church. Our fleshly nature prefers to act willfully and aggressively, as Jacob and even Abraham did, leaving messes that God must graciously and mercifully clean up. Our fleshly nature also resists the call to depend on grace, for the flesh always leaps to justify itself by knowledge or morality or accomplishments.

Ephraim's dangerous boast - claiming that their wealth protects them from accusations of sin - finds many echoes in our own time. It is human nature to seek the false security of wealth, numbers, conformity, status, culture, religious observance, or other such things. None of these can help at all with our need for God's grace. It is much more dangerous to deny our sins and weaknesses than it is simply to acknowledge them humbly and accept God's forgiveness.

God always allows us to make our own choice. Even most believers choose to attempt to justify themselves by something other than grace, yet God is patient and gracious with them also. His grace is strong, and he lovingly waits for those who are humble and trusting enough to live by it.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How does Jacob's nature parallel the nation of Israel? How does he parallel believers in general? Why is his willingness to talk with God so significant? How can we apply it? What does it mean to "wait for your God"? How does it connect with Hosea's overall lessons about grace and God's nature?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, May 2012

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MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HOSEA

Notes For Week Eleven: Ransomed From The Grave (Hosea 12:1-13a)

God constantly reminds his people of their need for his grace and of his eagerness to grant it. His grace covers a multitude of sins when we are humbly dependent on him and humbly aware of his presence. Sadly, Hosea's fellow Israelites have strayed so far from God's presence that they are in danger of spiritual death. But fortunately, God can bring us back from the grave.

Review of Recent Classes

God called his people out of bondage in Egypt, symbolically called Jesus out of safe-keeping in Egypt, and now calls each soul out of the "Egyptian" slavery to sin (Hosea 10:9-11:4). God is often distressed by his people's idolatry and other sins, but when he considers their destruction, he realizes that his own nature prohibits him from ever giving them up (Hosea 11:5-12:8).

God's compassion is aroused even by the suffering his people bring on themselves. In Hosea's time, it upset him that they foolishly debated whether Egypt or Assyria would make a better ally. God's righteous nature makes it impossible for him to have fellowship with sin, and he must see that a price is paid for sin, yet his grace and compassion are ultimately stronger than his wrath.

Someday the Israelites will come trembling to God. He will roar like a lion - yet those who trust him need not be terrified; only our sin and pride make God seem dangerous. But God also knows the reality that his people are weak and prone to sin. But when they stray, he asks only that they return, for he desires mercy and not punishment. Israel's patriarch Jacob serves as a history lesson. He deceived his family and even contended with God, but he often talked to God and always acknowledged the reality of God's presence. Jacob's example (both positive and negative) teaches us to wait for our God in humility, not to become hard-headed and prideful.

I am The Lord our God (Hosea 12:9-13)

Knowing that his audience takes great pride in their heritage and their history, Hosea uses these to remind them of what God desires for them and of how much they need God. Like us, they often thought that perhaps they had grown strong enough or wise enough or wealthy enough that they were no longer so dependent on God. But we all shall always need God's grace and mercy.

Hosea presents a collection of images from the past, ranging from tents to prophets (12:9-10). He reminds them of their deliverance, and of the many years that they lived in tents in the desert, dependent on God for their daily needs. They are dangerously close to repeating this in the days ahead; and God will allow it to happen because they need the lesson in humility. They are so engrossed in their worldly agendas that even the law's "built-in" reminders* mean little to them.

* The end of verse 9 ("as in the days of your appointed feasts") refers to the annual Feast Of Tabernacles, during which the people were supposed to recreate their ancestors' nomadic experience, as a living reminder of their own ongoing dependence on God. But, as with so many of the spiritual reminders in the law, the people had gradually changed this into something different that ignored the original point.

Through the centuries, God provided his people with prophets who brought them visions, figures of speech, and numerous other reminders to try to keep them focused on God's presence and on his desire to live among them. Just as the prophets spoke both literally and figuratively, both

prophetically and factually, so also Jesus and the apostles used a wide variety of forms of communication, from parables* to direct instruction to historical lessons, to teach us the gospel.

* The word in verse 10 that the NIV and NASB translate as "parables" means something more general than the kinds of parables we know from the New Testament. Some older versions translate it as "similitudes".

God makes sure to keep his Word from becoming stereotyped or pigeonholed as a form of mere human communication. If we listen, he will tell each one of us what we need to hear. Sayings that may mean little to someone else can speak clearly to our hearts, and vice versa. But we do have to listen. We have to let the gospel of truth replace our preconceptions and human agendas.

There are numerous spiritual parallels between the patriarch Jacob, the people of Israel, and the present-day (then) nation of Ephraim (12:11-14). The reference to Gilead and Gilgal highlights the chronic problem of misguided worship - the belief that rituals and observances in themselves earn favor with God, and can make up for a lack of grace and peace in the rest of our lives.

To deal with the equally chronic problem of hero-worship, he reminds them of a humbling time in Jacob's life, when "Israel served to get a wife" (Genesis 29:14-30). He deliberately calls him Israel to emphasize that the nation as a whole was never meant to deal with powerful worldly nations on their own terms*. We are called to be dependent on God, to bring their needs to God, and to allow God to choose both what to give us by grace and also what we do not need.

* In the episode in Genesis 29, Jacob had to perform many years of toil in order to obtain his wife, and he was also crudely outsmarted by Laban - even though Jacob had previously been so successful in outsmarting and deceiving others, the time came when his worldly skills let him down badly.

Later, God provided for their spiritual needs through his relationship with Moses, who was a prophet in an important sense of the word - not so much by predicting the future as by explaining the present. Because God could not yet fully manifest his presence to each believer, the people were heavily dependent on Moses - yet only on rare occasions did they have any appreciation for Moses at all. Most of the time they denigrated his humble leadership style.

Returning to the (then) present, Ephraim (Israel) reflects these historic spiritual problems. This does not excuse what Hosea's contemporaries are doing - rather, it reminds us how persistent our human nature can be. We have a tendency to think that we can reach a level of spiritual growth at which we are no longer as vulnerable or as dependent on God - but in fact, this feeling in itself makes us vulnerable to the kinds of spiritual ills that Hosea repeatedly addresses.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does God remind them of the time when their ancestors lived in tents? Is there a parallel message for us? Why does God emphasize all the ways that he has spoken to his people? What would the parallel message to us be? What lessons should they have learned from past history? Are there parallels for us?

Causes of Spiritual Decline (Hosea 13:1-3)

Hosea is not merely rebuking the fallen so as to condemn them. He wants both them and us to understand some of the causes of spiritual decline, both to help us avoid them and also to help us come back to God when we do stray from him. Idolatry and pride are two of the leading causes of spiritual decline - both are strong temptations, but both are also avoidable.

Idolatry of any kind is an act of folly, but no one would worship idols if they were not such a strong temptation (13:1-3). The allure of idols - whether the Canaanite idols that openly tempted

the Israelites with their promises of pleasure or plenty, or our own idols that make the same promises more subtly - is hard to resist when we are unable or unwilling to see their end results.

God exalted Ephraim, but the land was debased by idolatry. Things seemed fine on the outside, but the decay was there for the discerning to see. Rather than emphasize idolatry's sinfulness or evil, Hosea describes its folly. Their idols were cleverly crafted with time and skill, but made by foolish persons who failed to see the inherent silliness of bowing down to one's own creation*.

* See also Isaiah's more detailed discussion of the same principles in Isaiah 44:9-23.

We do the same thing with our idols, though in less obvious ways. We declare someone to be a hero or a role model or a leader, even though he or she is a mere human like us, and we then are outraged when our idol fails to meet our expectations. Or we spend our lives in pursuit of material things that can neither satisfy us nor appreciate how hard we worked to get them. These and other follies are little removed from the crudest form of idolatry of Hosea's day.

What few positive fruits idols produce last only as long as the morning mist, the early dew, chaff on a threshing floor, or smoke dissipating*. God's repeated warnings against idolatry are as compassionate as they are firm. Even the idols themselves get little, in the long run, from our worship. Sports heroes, successful politicians, popular celebrities, and other human idols must constantly feed their fragile egos with new successes or adorners, or they become discontented. And their worshipers are fickle, always demanding more and new things from their idols.

* Some commentators point to verse 3 as one of the high points of Hosea from a literary viewpoint, because the original Hebrew packs so many vivid images into such a brief passage.

Idols give little of real value and rarely last, but Yahweh the living God is still, always has been, and always will be the Lord our God (13:4-6), our true Savior. Everyone, no matter how strong or intelligent he or she seems, is utterly dependent on God. We all need unconditional, unearned grace; and we can do nothing to save other humans except remind them to seek God. Other humans need neither idolatrous worship nor angry criticism - they need love and God's grace.

God has always happily cared for and fed humans, from miraculously caring for Israel in the desert to providing us all with water, air, food, and other essentials without us even noticing. We do not have to earn these or any other blessings, and we usually do not even have to ask for them. God does not expect us to notice it all - he just wants us to know that he cares about us.

There is really only one 'wrong' response to his care: to think we have earned what he gives us. Pride and ingratitude began Israel's slide into idolatry and materialism; and the same problems can derail us in a moment. Instead of pushing each other to prove worthy of God's blessings, we should instead encourage one another to remain humble and grateful in God's presence.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What temptations do idols offer? Do Hosea's descriptions of Israel's idols apply also to our own? Are there any ways we can be more aware of the ways that God takes care of us? What spiritual benefits might this have?

Death & New Life (Hosea 13:1-14)

Israel's idolatry, pride, and other rampant sins can lead only to death. Because they have so willfully resisted God's words and his grace, God's continued presence now threatens danger and death instead of blessing and peace. But fortunately, God's nature also has one more feature that will come into play - he can ransom and restore even the dead.

As God warns the people of the consequences of their idolatry, he compares himself to predators such as lions, leopards, and bears (13:7-13). This is not a direct threat so much as a reminder of the hazards of God's presence. Believers should watch their own lives, not the lives of unbelievers, who are not yet in God's direct presence. It is our uncleanness, not theirs, that is dangerous. This is why Paul said, "what business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside" (1 Corinthians 5:12-13).

The prophet challenges them, "where is your king?", as this was one of their less tangible forms of idolatry. From the days of Samuel when the nation demanded a king so that they could be like the pagan nations, to the time of Hosea when the people took pride in having strongman rulers who used force to get their way, this was a chronic problem that pushed them away from God.

Israel is a child without wisdom. Their problem is not a lack of factual knowledge, but the lack of proper priorities and perspective. They frantically pursue their fleshly agendas without realizing that they not only are hurting others, but are also harming themselves without getting anything lasting in return. They are still alive outwardly, but they are spiritually dead.

But in God death does not have to be the end (13:14a*). God has been redeeming humans from death since he created the first ones. Whenever humans sin, they die spiritually - but God can always bring us back to life if we are faithful and humble. Even when we die physically, our souls still live. The question is not whether we shall live forever, for we shall - the question is whether we shall live forever in God's presence or out of God's presence. And this depends not on our knowledge or accomplishments, but on our humble acceptance of God's mercy.

* The Hebrew for this verse is ambiguous, which leads to different translations. These notes are based on the NIV's rendering. Versions such as the NASB and NLT interpret the verse much more negatively, connecting it (via the phrase "I will have no compassion") with the negative thoughts in verse 15. The NIV's positive translation seems to fit in better with Hosea's pattern of alternating rebukes or warnings with extremely positive promises. It also matches the way that the verse is quoted in 1 Corinthians (see below).

So Hosea rejoices in the destruction of death's power. Of all the things that humans fear, death is usually the most frightening because of its finality and inevitability. But Hosea almost taunts death, pointing out its inability to do any permanent harm to those whom God has redeemed. The fearful power of the grave is rendered powerless by God's grace and compassion.

In Jesus, our hope of a resurrection is more clearly and deeply defined for us (1 Corinthians 15:54-57)*, so we have even more reason not to fear death. Death has already been defeated, so we don't have to worry about the result. Death was not defeated by human wisdom or goodness, but by the freely-flowing grace of God and his willingness to do anything to bring us to him.

* The way that Hosea 13:14 is used in 1 Corinthians 15 could suggest that the intended meaning of the original is the positive encouragement about God's triumph over death (see note above).

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does God compare himself to a predator? Does this imagery imply that God will deliberately harm his people, or does it mean something else? Can God's presence ever become a hazard to us? In Hosea's lifetime, what would the sayings in verse 14 have meant? What should we learn from them?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, May 2012
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MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HOSEA

Notes For Week Twelve: Healing The Wound (Hosea 1:1-1:11)

To a large degree, the Israelites have determined future events by their own previous actions, since trouble from Assyria is now almost certain. But in a more important way, the future can be whatever they wish it to be. More important than the fate of the physical nation is the spiritual future of its inhabitants - and on that subject Hosea is full of encouragement and good news.

Review of Recent Classes

No matter how badly his people go astray, whenever God contemplates their destruction, he realizes that, "how can I give you up?" (Hosea 11:5-12:8). And so, even though our sins lead to spiritual death, God ransoms us from the grave (Hosea 12:9-13:14a).

God repeatedly reminds them that, "I am the Lord your God," appealing to them to remember all that he has done for them, in contrast to their useless idols. At times in the past they have had to live in tents, completely dependent on God's providence; and meanwhile he has sent them many prophets to teach them in every conceivable manner. Hosea uses further history lessons to teach them to learn humility, gratitude, and faith, not pride and self-righteousness, from their past.

There are many possible causes of spiritual decline, but some of them occur over and over. Idols are very tempting, and so Hosea does not dwell so much on how evil they are as on how foolish they are. We have always been dependent on God for care and feeding, both literally and spiritually. He does not ask for us to earn this, but to receive it with gratitude and humility.

To the world, death comes as the end; but in God death can always be followed by new life. God's presence can be a hazard to the prideful, whose willful resistance can lead to spiritual death. But death's power is destroyed by God's grace and his redemptive powers. Paul used Hosea 13:14 to assure the Corinthians of the lasting truth of the resurrection, and even in the Old Covenant God always held out the promise of spiritual rebirth for those who desired it.

Final Warning (Hosea 13:1-13)

No matter what the Israelites do now, some degree of trouble with Assyria is inevitable. And it will be remarkably unpleasant when the brutal Assyrians invade. Hosea gives them a last chance to avoid the very worst, if they can humble themselves and return to God's gracious presence. We know that they chose otherwise - yet let us learn the right lessons from their mistakes.

Hosea uses the image of the east wind* to warn of coming danger from the nation's ill-advised flirtations with Assyria (13:14b-15). Will God really have no compassion when his people suffer at the hands of the cruel Assyrians? Not literally, for he will mourn over those killed by the Assyrians as well as those who suffer at the hands of Babylon when Judah falls in 586 BC.

* He previously used the image in 12:1. The east wind came from the desert, so it was always hot and unpleasant, and was usually dangerous to those exposed to it. Hosea uses it as a metaphor for Assyria, the great power to the east, which the Israelites have so foolishly involved in their affairs.

But while he will grieve for them, neither will he intervene. They themselves have pushed God's presence from them with their idolatry and aggression; and they have turned this into a "double sin" by becoming prideful and boastful. They have not allowed him to intervene in their affairs

or to live close to their hearts. The coming disaster is not a vindictive punishment concocted by a vengeful God - rather, it illustrates what happens when God must withdraw his presence.

The nation is thriving and fruitful* now, but this is only in appearance, and it will not last. It is easy to see this from our perspective - the challenge for us is to apply it wisely. In our own time, numerous prophets of doom predict disaster not for genuine spiritual reasons (though many claim to speak for God) but because it fits their own agendas for obtaining power or other worldly goals. The warnings of genuine prophets like Hosea ask listeners only to become more humble, more caring, and more gracious, rather than telling them that they must follow a particular program or leader to avoid trouble.

*The word in verse 15 translated in the NIV as "thrives" and in the NASB as "flourishes" is literally the word for "fruitful" (which is the KJV reading). This is a play on words using the name "Ephraim", which means "twice fruitful" (see Genesis 41:52).

Because the Israelites have turned away from God's grace, they must bear their guilt and endure the consequences (13:16). God allows each of us the free will to choose from many different options in life, rarely if ever forcing us to do his will. The implications of our choices eventually become clear, and God is well aware of our need to learn from experience. He warns us and then allows us to heed him or not as we will - an extraordinary display of grace and patience.

Many Christians do not understand the point of God's warnings in Scripture. God does not demand punishment or even outward results. He will do anything to bring his people back to living contentedly in his presence and spreading his grace and compassion to others. He calls us to deal with our fears about the future and with disasters in the present not through guilt or vengeance, not through methods or agendas, but by growing in our awareness of the need for patience, graciousness, and humility.

The gruesome prospects Hosea describes are only a brief hint of what will happen when the Assyrians invade*. Neither God nor his prophet takes satisfaction in this, nor are they speaking out of spite or pique - they simply know what will happen if the people push God's presence too far away for God to be able to help them when the real crisis finally comes.

* Ripping open the wombs of pregnant women and dashing the bodies of small infants against hard surfaces are two of the many horrifying torments that the Assyrians notoriously inflicted on defeated nations. Some of the other tortures and punishments were even more grisly.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How could a compassionate God allow his people to suffer for their mistakes? Is there a difference between God deliberately harming them, versus allowing them to suffer at the hands of others? Was there any chance for Israel to avoid these consequences at this point? What should we learn from this final warning?

Return □ Israel (Hosea 1 □:1-3)

After his final warning, Hosea issues his final appeal for the Israelites to return to God. He clarifies the simple and generous terms that God offers them - they do not have to do anything; they need only acknowledge the truths that they have so unnecessarily rejected for so long. Moreover, this offer will remain open - it is best if they return now, but they can still return later.

As he prepares to close his book of prophecy, Hosea returns to his key theme of "mercy, not sacrifice" (14:1-2). All of the warnings and critiques in Hosea were never to inflict pain or fear in themselves. The prophet has constantly, and consistently, called his listeners not to try to

excuse or deny their sins and mistakes, and not even to try to make up for their sins, but rather to accept God's grace and to return to him in humility, with a readiness to accept what matters to God instead of willfully pursuing their worldly agendas.

This is seen in his odd-sounding instruction to "take words* with you". The prophet essentially says that the situation is so hopeless that no possible action can in itself save them. Of course, he is not asking for mere outward eloquence or for a specific magic phrase, but for sincere words from the heart. Specifically, God wants his people to come seeking his forgiveness and grace.

* The standard versions translate verse 2 as, "take words with you", "take with you words", or something very similar. Some more modern, less literal versions use "confessions" or "prayers" instead of "words"; but this is an interpretation on the part of these translators - the original Hebrew simply says, "words".

This is why right now he wants them to come with words only - to offer sacrifices, actions, or even promises of future actions would show that they miss the point entirely. They are being offered the chance for a completely fresh start in spite of their many mistakes. God wants them finally to trust him, to believe that he truly can and will forgive, forget, and erase their past sins. He asks us also to trust that his grace really is as complete and thorough as he promises.

So at present, all that God wants is for them to accept his grace and, and if they want to offer something, it should be "the fruit of our lips," humble expressions of thanks and gratitude. We can get so fixated on our attempts to prove ourselves worthy that we completely forget how much it means to God when we humbly and sincerely praise him without trying to earn our relationship with him. "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise - the fruit of lips that confess his name." (Hebrews 13:15)

If they do this, they can also reach an overdue but welcome realization (14:3). They will be able to see Assyria for what it is, and indeed shall be able to see many other things in the right light. When we are intent on fulfilling our own desires, it is hard to see the emptiness behind the use of force and the worship of idols. Aggressive behavior and worldly idols seem tempting, even glorious, when our focus strays from God's presence and his grace. Even the "Assyrians" seem like a wonderful way to fulfill our desires, instead of a brutal and dangerous problem to avoid.

There will be some who heed Hosea's words and find spiritual rebirth, yet who will also have to live through the downfall of the nation as a whole. His message to them is not to be resentful towards the sinful, but to seek comfort in God's care. The fatherless, like the friendless and the homeless and the rejected of every kind, can count on finding compassion from God when they seek him in humility, even if the world responds to their humility with coldness and indifference.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does it mean to "return" to God? Why does Hosea ask them to take only "words" when they return? How should we apply this? How could this help the Israelites to see Assyria as it really is and to abandon their idols? What things might we be able to see more clearly if we valued God's grace more highly?

□ *Final Assurance (Hosea 14:9)*

In comparison with the few humble acknowledgements that God asks for, Hosea now details the lavish promises that God makes to those who return to him. His full love and absolute spiritual protection are available to all who value them. Most of all, God offers full and true life to those who put their faith in his grace - or as Jesus called it, life to the full.

God promises to heal their waywardness and to love them freely (14:4). He is ready - and has always been ready - to allow mercy and grace to triumph over his own anger and judgment. The question is not whether he will really do this when we come to him humbly seeking his grace - the question is whether we really appreciate and understand that having God's love, and having the chance to know God, are of greater value than any of the things he gives us in this world.

Yahweh the living God is much more than a giver of blessings - he is the source of all life, physical and spiritual (14:5-8). This collage of images emphasizes nourishment, blossoming and flourishing* because God started and sustains all life on our planet. He did not do this only to help us score debating points against atheists - he did it to show his love and compassion for all, believers and unbelievers alike; and he did it to humble us all, believers and unbelievers alike. Until we see his creation from his viewpoint, we can hardly ask unbelievers to do the same.

* Other prophets, especially Isaiah, use the same type of imagery with similar meaning. See, for example, Isaiah 35:5-7, 41:18-19, and 55:10-13.

Amongst these vivid images is a picture of us dwelling in his shade. This combines the idea of God's presence with an emphasis on him as the provider of life. All of these images remind us of the harmony God seeks between himself, his creation, and the souls he made in his image.

The rejection of idols is essential to this harmony, not because it is a rule, but because the whole picture only works when we are in God's presence. Idols - anything from which we seek what only God can provide - draw us away from God's presence. We are afraid to discard our worldly idols because we fear the loss of the blessings they seem to give us - but in reality, all of the worthwhile blessings came from a gracious God to begin with; and when we seek him instead of idols, we can receive greater and more lasting blessings to go with the things he already gave us.

Hosea closes with a simple epilogue that resembles a passage from Proverbs (14:9). Rather than re-emphasize any specific lesson or point, it merely appeals to the discerning to consider the alternatives Hosea has presented. Our idols make promises they cannot fulfill, but we worship them anyway because they tell us what we want to hear. God doesn't tell us what we want to hear, and he gives us what we need instead of what we desire, yet he is the true giver of life.

If we humbly seek to live by grace in God's presence, then he will give us true life, "life to the full," not necessarily filled with earthly blessings but filled with the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). God can give life in the most unfavorable circumstances, in the most inhospitable environments, and in face of the highest odds. He can even give life after death, both spiritual and physical. And he asks only for us to realize that he does it by mercy, not sacrifice, and that he simply asks us to acknowledge him as our Creator and Redeemer.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What has made God now so willing to love and forgive his people? What kind of life is promised by the images in this passage? Why can idols have no place in it? How does he want us to respond to Hosea's epilogue?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, May 2012

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