

“They Know Not the Lord”

Sermons on the Minor Prophets: Hosea (4)

Texts: Hosea 4:1-5:7; John 14:1-11

As a prophet called to his office by YHWH, Hosea functions as a divine process server to God’s covenant people, Israel. Hosea brings the people of Israel the list of the charges which YHWH has against them. The list is long and quite detailed. Israel’s sins are great and the nation is about to come under judgment. But why is Israel in such terrible spiritual shape? Hosea reveals that God’s people are perishing because of a lack of knowledge of YHWH and his word. In Hosea’s indictment of Israel, one group in particular is singled out as the chief offenders, the religious leaders, i.e., the priests and self-appointed prophets. These men are held responsible for Israel’s current spiritual condition, which was graphically illustrated by Gomer’s promiscuity in the enacted parable of Gomer-Israel in chapters 1-3. Because the people and the nation no longer have a proper knowledge of YHWH and his ways, they now face the supreme covenant sanction, expulsion from the promised land at the hand of Assyrian invaders.

As we have seen from our study of those prophets YHWH sent to Israel (the Northern Kingdom), Israel had become as pagan as their Canaanite neighbors. The priests of Israel should have known what God’s law required of them. They were assigned the task of leading the people to worship and serve the Lord as he commanded. But they were also to warn the people about the dangers of idolatry instead of leading them to engage in it. At this point in Israel’s history, the nation finally crossed the line into judgment. Israel’s priests (who were not descendants of the tribe of Levi) did not know God’s law, were indifferent to God’s law, or willfully disobeyed God’s law. With the full approval of Israel’s kings (the House of Jehu), it was the priests who led the people of Israel astray to worship and serve the false gods of their pagan neighbors—especially Baal, the Canaanite weather and fertility god. If the people will perish due to a lack of knowledge of YHWH and his ways, responsibility for this deplorable condition falls upon the priests, the teachers and guardians of YHWH’s word. The priests have failed. The people will perish.

Then as now, YHWH holds the leadership of his people (i.e., the priests in the Old Testament, pastors and elders in the New) accountable for the health of his flock. Those called to preach, teach, lead God’s people in worship, and then shepherd God’s flock, bear greater responsibility than do the sheep for whom they are responsible. When such people use their positions to gain prestige, power, and wealth, or when they remain indifferent to the plight of God’s people, or worse, lead them astray through false doctrine, YHWH holds them accountable. The harshest words in the Bible are directed to false teachers and Israel’s priests. The greater judgment they will receive, reflects the gravity of their sin against YHWH.

We have completed our study of the first half of Hosea’s prophecy (chapters 1-3), the enacted parable of Hosea’s marriage to the promiscuous Gomer. We have seen that Gomer’s bearing three children—only one of whom is identified as Hosea’s, are symbolic of the nation as a whole. In the Israel-Gomer parable, Israel’s behavior mirrors that of Gomer—unfaithful, constantly seeking other lovers, and then bearing their children. In the enacted parable, Hosea’s son with Gomer is to be named Jezreel, a name which recalls that familiar place in Israel’s history associated with bloodshed and death. Gomer’s daughter is to be named Lo-Ruhamah (“no mercy”), a name which indicates that Israel’s covenant status has changed. Israel will no longer be the recipient of YHWH’s mercy. The third child mentioned, a son, is to be named Lo-Ammi, which means “not my people.” His name is the strongest indication yet that YHWH

has divorced Israel and the nation now faces certain and imminent judgment with the Assyrian invasion.

Recall from our initial sermon on Hosea, this prophecy does not have a typical organizational structure. The book is best divided into two halves (the enacted parable of chapters 1-3) and the second half (chapters 4-14) which is a series of prophetic warnings, laments, poems, and sermons. What makes the second half of Hosea's prophecy a bit hard to interpret is that there are very few places in these chapters where we can tie YHWH's words, spoken through Hosea his prophet, to particular events then occurring in Israel, as can do with the Book of Amos. Hosea's ministry comes at a period of great political chaos in Israel—one assassination after another, with on-going military and economic collapse. Shortly after Hosea completed his prophecy (about 725 B.C.), Assyrian King Sargon II finally took the province of Samaria, the last hold out in the Northern Kingdom. This was a time of complete chaos and societal unraveling. Hosea does not speak to specific events, but to the nation's pattern of sin against YHWH in terms of their rejection of God's word, apathy to YHWH's warnings of judgment, and complete indifference regarding their sin. In this regard, Hosea's world is much like our own.

So, when we pick up in chapter 4, we find a collection of Hosea's prophecies given during this time united by similar themes. Chapters 4-7 speak of the deplorable spiritual condition of the nation, chapters 8-11 look back at the history of the nation, while chapters 12-14 speak to the nation's current's plight in light of YHWH's promises of future redemption. In many places, the material in these chapters appears to be written records (transcripts) of portions of messages spoken by Hosea to the people on various occasions, and now loosely compiled into the material the second half of the prophecy.¹

In the opening verse of chapter 4, YHWH's intent to serve Israel with the covenant lawsuit announcing judgment becomes clear. *"Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel, for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land."* Hosea has been invested with YHWH's authority to speak YHWH's words to YHWH's people. In the biblical sense, a prophet is not so much one who predicts the future (although that may be the case) but someone who comes with YHWH's authority to speak on his behalf. The people of Israel (YHWH's children) are commanded to "hear" what Hosea says because what Hosea says, YHWH says. This is not Hosea's personal complaint, but YHWH's official declaration. This is why throughout the New Testament, prophecy is associated with preaching.

The word translated as "controversy" means something like "charge or accusation."² YHWH is summoning his people to hear and then acknowledge that his charge against them is valid, i.e., that upon hearing the list of their sins the people know that YHWH is right. His charge is directed to all the inhabitants of the land—humans or animals, all of whom are YHWH's possession (as mentioned in verse 3). The reason for YHWH's accusation is Israel's sinful behavior as spelled out in verses 1b-2. *"There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed."* Because we are not Jews, don't read Hebrew, and we are so far removed from Hosea's time and place, it is easy for us to miss the obvious. This list summarizes Israel's violations of the Ten Commandments as found in Exodus 20:1-17 and as restated in Deuteronomy 5:6-21.³ In other words, these are they ways in

¹ Andersen and Freedman, Hosea, 315.

² Kidner, Message of Hosea, 46.

³ Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 75.

which the people of Israel are sinning against YHWH.

The first charge YHWH makes against them is that there is no faithfulness (or integrity) in the land. The people are no longer “principled.” They no longer ask themselves what is right or wrong—they just act upon sinful impulse with no consideration of what God says about their conduct. The people of Israel are without love—for YHWH and for each other—the very heart of the Ten Commandments, which are often summarized according to the two tables, “love for God,” and love of neighbor. The third charge is that the people no longer have any knowledge of God—they no longer have any sense of who YHWH is (the creator of all things and their covenant Suzerian), nor do they have any feeling of devotion to him. They think like pagans and they act like pagans. They have lost all sense of the need, or blessing of worshipping the true and living God, which should define their identity and their history in light of the covenant YHWH made with them at Mount Sinai. The people of Israel are in dire straights if they live unprincipled lives (without regard to God’s law), if they love neither God nor neighbor, and if they have lost all sense of who YHWH is or their love for him. They are no longer party to the Sinai covenant.

As a result of this mind-set and with pagan practices widespread throughout Israel, the specific sins mentioned in YHWH’s indictment reflect the people’s true spiritual condition. It is not that the people of Israel commit these specific sins—all of Adam’s fallen children sin like this, including us. Rather, the issue is that these people were characterized by these sins, not their struggle against their sin in maintaining their integrity, or knowledge and respect for YHWH, or love for him and their neighbor. These people do not struggle with sin because they embrace it.

Their speech is characterized by swearing—they use YHWH’s name improperly and without due respect, something forbidden in the third commandment (Exodus 20:7). They lie as a habit of life—a violation of the ninth commandment (Exodus 20:16). They murder—either with their hands or through hatred of their neighbor in their heart—bidden in the sixth commandment (Exodus 20:13). They think nothing of stealing—ignoring the eighth commandment (Exodus 20:15). They are adulterers with their bodies and in their hearts—bidden in the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14). And they are idolaters—they break all bonds (i.e., the requirements of the covenant with YHWH) and are violators of the second commandment (Exodus 20:4-6). These people lie, steal, cheat, abuse YHWH’s name, worship Baal and set up Asherah poles in the forests, all without the slightest regard for the law of God.⁴ They are “not my people,” through their actions—a condition which YHWH officially confirms.

Because Israel has fallen so far, we read in verse 3 of consequences coming upon the land (i.e., the political, economic, and military chaos we’ve mentioned earlier). “*Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away.*” When we read that the land mourns, we ought not think of a specific drought or famine, but a deep sense that everything good in society is a distant memory. Wealth has disappeared. The rich find themselves just as bad off as the poor. The armies march not into battle, but now retreat in defeat and panic. The land is no longer farmed, the wells dry up for lack of care. No one has enough of the necessities of life. Even the animals are impacted. The land itself is said to mourn. Everything has gone wrong. YHWH has removed his hand of blessing. All of Israel now suffers. Even the beasts. Even the land.

Through the prophet Hosea, YHWH’s legal indictment has been issued. YHWH’s charges against Israel

⁴ Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 76.

are clear to all. Israel is a nation of covenant-breakers who stand condemned. In verse 4, YHWH tells Israel, “*Yet let no one contend, and let none accuse, for with you is my contention, O priest.*” Three times in what follows, YHWH speaks of Israel as “Lo-Ammi” (not my people). In effect, YHWH is saying, “let no one dare answer my accusations.” When humans judge others, we do so sinfully and fallibly, so there may be room for explanation or excuse. Not so with YHWH. He will not listen to any excuses or explanations from Israel’s priests—men who should know better, and who should know that it is they who are primarily responsible for Israel’s current condition. Since judgment begins in the house of God, those responsible for the condition of YHWH’s people will face judgment first.

The priests and the schools of prophets associated with them are now singled out (v. 5). O priest “*you shall stumble by day; the prophet also shall stumble with you by night; and I will destroy your mother.*” Since walking is a metaphor for how one lives one’s life, stumbling is an indication of impending judgment. Originally, Israel’s priests were improperly appointed by Jeroboam because of his opposition to the Levites who served in the Jerusalem temple. The prophets who are mentioned here are either appointed by the House of Jehu, or else claim to be prophets—but who have never been called by YHWH, so that the words they speak are not YHWH’s, but their own. Coming from the same mother (the spiritually adulterous kingdom of Israel), together, the priests and prophets have led the people astray. Having caused the nation to stumble, they themselves will stumble both in day and at night.

The consequences of their unfaithfulness is that, “*my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.*” The people no longer believe that YHWH alone is to be worshiped, but have added the worship of Baal to their Hebrew feasts and sacrifices. The people do not know what is right and what is wrong. They do not know that Baal is a mere idol, or that YHWH the true and living God. Because this is the case, YHWH says to the priests and prophets, “*because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.*” If Israel is “Lo-Ammi,” then so are the children of the priests, no longer in the covenant, no longer marked off by circumcision as the children of Israel, the people of YHWH.

The more priests and prophets, the worse things became. According to verse 7, “*the more they increased, the more they sinned against me.*” It is almost the case that the people of Israel would have been better off had they had no priests nor prophets. YHWH says to them, “*I will change their glory into shame. They feed on the sin of my people; they are greedy for their iniquity. And it shall be like people, like priest; I will punish them for their ways and repay them for their deeds.*” The priests will lose their privileged status and find themselves the butt of people’s jokes. The animal sacrifices which the people make (of which a portion goes to the priests) will cease. The priests love the people’s desire to lift the guilt of their sin through the sacrifices—all the more meat for the priests to consume or to sell. These who appointed them, as well as all who listen to them, will share in the judgment YHWH brings upon them.

YHWH’s indictment goes on. “*They shall eat, but not be satisfied; they shall play the whore, but not multiply, because they have forsaken the LORD to cherish whoredom, wine, and new wine, which take away the understanding.*” The priests may eat the portion of the sacrifices allotted to them, but it will be food which does not satisfy. They will engage in Israel’s sin (spiritual prostitution), but will make no more converts to their YHWH-Baal religion. These men have forsaken YHWH and are spiritual adulterers who relish in the drunken pagan feasts, leaving them in a stupor.

Things are so bad, YHWH can say of the people of Israel, “*my people inquire of a piece of wood, and their walking staff gives them oracles. For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they have left their God to play the whore. They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains and burn offerings on the hills,*

under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is good.” Hosea gives us a brief catalogue of some of the pagan worship now being practiced by the people of Israel as instructed by their own priests. These seek oracles from wooden idols and make decisions using divining rods which are spun but which cannot speak. They build temples on the hills and mountains and supposedly worship YHWH where the pagans sacrifice to their gods. YHWH calls these priests spiritual whores, who have themselves been deceived, and are now leading the entire nation over the cliff.

They will be suitably punished. *“Therefore your daughters play the whore, and your brides commit adultery. I will not punish your daughters when they play the whore, nor your brides when they commit adultery; for the men themselves go aside with prostitutes and sacrifice with cult prostitutes, and a people without understanding shall come to ruin.”* If the people love fornication (sex before marriage), adultery (sex outside of marriage) or homosexuality (sex with persons of the same sex) and they can justify doing so by participating in the fertility rites of pagan religions, then YHWH will let them reap the consequences of their rejection of his command not to do this—ruin. People who do not know, or who do not see this behavior as sinful (i.e., they do not have understanding) will find themselves the spiritual bride of pagan adulterers, who can only lead them further astray.

In verses 15-19, YHWH warns his people about their two most prominent centers of worship—Gilgal, and Beth-aven. *“Though you play the whore, O Israel, let not Judah become guilty.”* There is a bitter irony as the judgment about to fall upon Israel should serve as a warning to Judah (the Southern Kingdom) not to follow the same path to destruction and keep away from the two places mentioned in the next verse.⁵ *“Enter not into Gilgal, nor go up to Beth-aven, and swear not, ‘As the LORD lives.’”* Gilgal is that place on the Jordan River where the men of Israel were circumcised before entering into the promised land (Joshua 4:19). Beth-aven means “house of trouble,” an obvious play on words for Beth-el (“House of God) which is no doubt the city in view.⁶ Do not go to Bethel or Gilgal because the people swear oaths of idolatry, not covenant faithfulness to YHWH. YHWH says “stay out!”

But YHWH knows the condition of Israel’s heart. *“Like a stubborn heifer, Israel is stubborn; can the LORD now feed them like a lamb in a broad pasture?”* YHWH can feed them. But Israel does not want the food he gives. Why? According to verse 17, *“Ephraim is joined to idols; leave him alone.”* Ephraim is another name for Israel. Because of the nation’s lust after idols, YHWH says of them, *“when their drink is gone, they give themselves to whoring; their rulers dearly love shame. A wind has wrapped them in its wings, and they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices.”* The nation is driven along not by love for YHWH’s word or covenant, but by a spirit of stupor which blows them into a place of shame, a place where their sacrifices are seen as the embarrassment they have become.

Chapter 5 opens with three imperatives (commands) which are contained in YHWH’s indictment of Israel. *“Hear this, O priests! Pay attention, O house of Israel! Give ear, O house of the king!”* The priests, the people of Israel, and the even king (i.e., the self-appointed House of Jehu) are summoned to listen to the charges made by YHWH and spelled out in the balance of the chapter. The priests may be primarily responsible for Israel’s spiritual adultery, but Israel’s guilt is national, and extends to all those who followed the priests into Canaanite paganism. YHWH announces to the nation, *“for the judgment is for you; for you have been a snare at Mizpah and a net spread upon Tabor. And the revoltors have gone*

⁵ Kidner, Message of Hosea, 55.

⁶ Garrett, Hosea, Joel, on Hosea 4:16.

deep into slaughter, but I will discipline all of them.” Mizpah and Tabor are additional places of pagan worship—Shittim (i.e., “pit”) may be a third such place, depending upon how the phrase the ESV renders “have gone deep” is best translated.

Those who worship in such places (i.e., rebels) will be caught in a snare and fall into a pit (metaphors for judgment). They cannot escape. YHWH will discipline all of them. YHWH knows who these people are. *“I know Ephraim, and Israel is not hidden from me; for now, O Ephraim, you have played the whore; Israel is defiled.”* It is too late to repent. The spiritual adulterers and idolaters have been caught in a snare, they have fallen into a pit. The nation is defiled, unclean (the opposite of “sanctified”). The people, their animals, their implements, their homes, their possessions, their land, all of it, is now unclean in YHWH’s sight. Israel will lose everything to the Assyrian invaders.

Having divorced Israel, YHWH pronounces his sentence. *“Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. For the spirit of whoredom is within them, and they know not the LORD.”* These are not God’s people struggling with their sin, or perhaps indifferent to it. Rather, these are people who no longer “know” YHWH. They do not know his word, his will, his ways, or who he is. They are so deep into their spiritual adultery they have crossed the line. YHWH will not call them back. Again, the reason is given. *“The pride of Israel testifies to his face; Israel and Ephraim shall stumble in his guilt.”* Israel’s ultimate sin is pride—a refusal to accept God’s word and commands. It is to say, “I am my own God, and will not listen, nor do I care what God says.” This sin is at the root of all others. If they will not accept the fact that they are guilty before God, well then, they will bear their own guilt and shame and suffer the temporal and eternal consequences. There is no forgiveness for the guilt of their sin.

Again, the citizens of Judah ought to be watching and heeding YHWH’s word of judgment. It is not yet too late for them. But as we will see when our focus shifts to those prophets YHWH sends to Judah (we’ll start with Micah, then Nahum), Judah will suffer the same tragic fate—exile in Babylon. *“Judah also shall stumble with them.”* But Israel will not remain to offer a collective, “I told you so” to Judah. Israel is cut off. We read in verses 6-7, *“with their flocks and herds they shall go to seek the LORD, but they will not find him; he has withdrawn from them. They have dealt faithlessly with the LORD; for they have borne alien children. Now the new moon shall devour them with their fields.”* Israel has had its chance. Its people are faithless. They see no need for forgiveness of sin. They do not believe YHWH’s promises. Now, the nation’s pagan practices (i.e., new moon observance) will bring about their downfall at the hands of the equally pagan Assyrians. You cannot worship Baal and YHWH.

What, then, do we say by way of application? Let’s start with the blame YHWH assigns to Israel’s priests. God rules his people through his appointed representatives. Moses and Joshua were covenant mediators for Israel, men who interceded with God for and on behalf of the people. But the tribe of Levi was to provide the priests, who conducted worship and offered the proper sacrifices for sin. Once Israel enters into the period of the Judges, the priests remain active—some faithful, others not so. In the days of the Monarchy, David and Solomon rule as kings, the priests again remain active. But after Israel’s civil war, Jeroboam establishes a new priesthood in the Northern Kingdom—men without the required Levitical pedigree. These are the men whom YHWH now holds responsible for Israel’s fall.

The same principle holds true today. Those men whom God calls to lead his church and shepherd his flock (ministers and elders) are held accountable by the Lord of the church for the spiritual well-being of God’s people (Christ’s church). One reason why we devote a Sunday each year to the ordination and installation of church officers is because this is so important. Where ministers and elders strive to ensure that God’s people know God’s word, the church is strong and vital. When ministers spend God’s time

talking about themselves, their interests, and their hobbies, their politics, their self-help techniques, the church suffers accordingly. May it never be said of us, “they do not know the Lord.”

This leads to a related point. The failure of Israel’s priests to instruct the people of Israel in God’s word and will reveals what happens when God’s people do not have the proper knowledge of God, we perish. As Christians we know that God has revealed himself in his word and supremely through the person of his Son, Jesus. We think of the encounter between Jesus and Philip in John 14—our New Testament lesson. After wrestling with Jesus saying that his disciples could not go with him when he departs back to the Father, Philip chimes in. *“Philip said to [Jesus], ‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.”*

The new covenant promised to Israel, has a much better mediator (Jesus) and much greater promises (forgiveness of sins, a perfect righteousness, and eternal life) revealed to us by God’s great high priest, final prophet, and all conquering king—Jesus. In the person and work of Christ we have the supreme revelation of God. If we have seen Jesus (i.e., in his word through the eyes of faith) and if we have heard his voice (in the Scriptures), then we know God. We will not perish. We are not like the people of Israel with improperly appointed priests, offering sacrifices to both YHWH and Baal, yet which can do nothing to take away the guilt of our sins, all the while leading us astray. In Jesus’s cross and empty tomb, we find the way, we possess the truth, and we enjoy the life, which Israel so desperately lacked. Through faith in Jesus, “we know the Lord.” More importantly, we are known by him.