

Read Hosea 1

When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and *have* children of harlotry; for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the LORD. Hosea 1:2

My wife is a loving and committed woman, and I have no fears of her ever leaving me. But I can certainly imagine what it would be like to find out that your wife has been having an affair with another man. To know that all the things she was saying to you, she was saying to him. Knowing that the physical and emotional relationship of our marriage had been compromised by a third party would be so hurtful, and make you unlikely to trust anyone's "I love you" ever again.

While we can imagine the pain of this situation, we should realize that God goes through this everyday. The reason that He instructed Hosea to marry a harlot, was so that the prophet could speak from first hand knowledge of the subject to an uncommitted Israel. It wasn't sin for Hosea to marry her, because his intentions were for a life-long relationship where affections would be reserved for one another. However, what Hosea hoped for and what he received were two different things. **Do you realize that saying we love God is not enough? If we put the devotion and energy into worldly things, we may not be saying "I love the world" out loud, but our actions are speaking loud and clear. And despite this harlotry, God always accepts us when we turn our hearts back to Him. What prostitution are you committing? What are you selling yourself to that continues to give so little back, besides guilt? You have not gone too far that God won't take you back. Turn your heart, and your energies back to Him. Don't just say you love the Lord...love Him with your actions!**

Read Hosea 2

She will pursue her lovers, but she will not overtake them; And she will seek them, but will not find *them*. Then she will say, 'I will go back to my first husband, for it was better for me than now!' Hosea 2:7

In youth ministry, I've learned to always get a good headcount so we have plenty of food for our events. In my first couple of years, I started to notice the trend of people signing their names "Nathan?" The question mark signified that maybe they would be there. After a while, I would have at least a third of my lists filled with people whose last name was apparently "?". So I started erasing those names. They were signing up unless something else better came along, in which case they would abandon their commitment to our event, and cost me food and money used to create the event for the expected number of people.

God's people had become "Israel?" If they could serve God without it getting in the way of any plans they might make, then they would fit Him in. However, they more Israel chased after false gods, the substitutes never fulfilled. They always came up short, which is why we never credit them with more than a little *g*. We pursue wealth, power, and other desires, only to realize that our lives haven't gotten better. And in those times, we decide to turn back to God and ask Him to clean up all the milk we spilled. **Now if you or I were God, we probably wouldn't take ourselves back. We know who we are,**

and how selfish we have often been. God's point through Hosea is not about our evil and how ashamed we should feel, but a reminder that the end result of sin for believers is the realization that we've gone too far. We rationalized sin to the point that we forgot that it had once ever bothered us. When we try to fit God in, instead of planning to submit to God at any moment, we always miss opportunities in our growth. God's words are simple, "I'll clean up the mess, but wouldn't it be better to avoid the mess in the first place?" Have you worried if the love of God can overcome who you've been? It can, and God has proven throughout Scripture and time, that there is no one He is unwilling to love and to save. You just have to choose to change.

Read Hosea 3

So I bought her for myself for fifteen *shekels* of silver and a homer and a half of barley. Hosea 3:2

When my wife talks, I cannot watch TV. This isn't a rule that she made, but one I've had to make for myself. When we were first married, I would get frustrated when she tried to talk to me during one of my favorite shows, and I would "uh-huh" her until she got the hint. I realized later, that my attitude lacked love. If I really loved my wife, there shouldn't be a show or game that would cause me to ignore something that she is saying that is obviously important to her.

Hosea here is not finding a new wife. God was not happy with the practice of marrying multiple wives. Hosea is actually coming across his wife who had left, and now she has been put into slavery or prostitution of some kind. Hosea didn't yell, "She's my wife, and I don't have to pay for her." He was willing to pay for what already belonged to Him. **What are you willing to give up for the one you love? If your spouse asked you to stop a certain activity, do you love them enough to do it? Is there anything or anyone that your husband/wife knows they are in serious competition with? That should never be, because a marriage is the second most important relationship you can ever enter into. So if you're married, examine what your spouse might see you placing in higher priority. And if you are unmarried, begin to commit now that you will show love and respect to your spouse by never forcing them to compete with other areas of your life.**

Read Hosea 4

Though you, Israel, play the harlot, do not let Judah become guilty; Also do not go to Gilgal, or go up to Beth-aven and take the oath: "As the LORD lives!" Hosea 4:15

I give credit to one person in particular who has influenced me against sin probably more than any other. That person is my son. He's only 8 years old, but he wants to do everything I do. When I was in the dirty crawlspace under our house, he was right there asking if he could come in too. I play the drums, and now he is learning how to play (and coming along faster than I ever did). And just as Tyler follows my example on all these things, he's just as likely to follow my example on sin. How many sons have I seen in

ministry follow the same sinful paths as their fathers? Sometimes the actions of the father turn the sons away from sin, but usually these boys do the same things their fathers did.

Israel has been hearing plainly about their sin. And here is God's warning: while you continue to love disobedience, do not lead others to love it as well. Jesus even warns of this in Matthew 18:6 that we do not lead little ones astray, or God will hold us responsible. Why would Israel influence Judah to sin? Maybe it's just because they are still countrymen, or maybe Israel tries to justify their sin by influencing Judah to the same things. **Who are you influencing around you? Maybe a child inside or outside of your family? Perhaps someone in your church or workplace who looks up to you? But are you influencing them for godliness or sin? You need to take stock of the people around you who hold you in high regard. Your sin can quickly become theirs, and while they made the choice, you helped to influence that choice. So who is watching you and what are they learning about being a Christian as a result of your life? Are they learning that the Christian life is very important, or just a lot of words.**

Read Hosea 5

I will go away *and* return to My place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek My face; In their affliction they will earnestly seek Me. Hosea 5:15

My 8-year-old son really blows me away sometimes. He had a rough morning in Sunday School some time back, and had failed to show respect to his Sunday School teacher. So my wife had him go to my office and wait for me to finish my responsibilities in the worship service. When I arrived in my office and saw him there I asked him what happened, and he told me how he had been disrespectful to his teacher. Then he told me that he had apologized to the teacher, told God he was sorry, and told God that he would accept any punishment that he needed to have. I told him he didn't have to pray the punishment part, especially since he recognized what he had done wrong so quickly. But, it was notable to me that he uttered such a prayer.

God is doing everything possible to get Israel's attention. And while they have chased after other loves, God has still desired to have them. Interestingly the work "acknowledge" means, "bear their punishment". For these people, God had to bring punishments to get their attention. Sometimes when we're close to the Lord, we quickly see our sin and often expect punishment, as my son did. But the paradox in this is that as we expect punishment, it often indicates we don't need it. God's punishment generally comes to those who aren't expecting it and really aren't taking much stock of what God even wants to do in their lives. But as a result of this punishment coming to Israel, they will acknowledge their guilt in the next chapter. **Has God ever had to punish you in order to get you to follow Him? How did you accept that punishment? Did it remind you that you'd rather not go through that again? All we have to do to miss the punishment and reproof of God is to examine ourselves regularly. We ask God to show us our sin, and then sit quietly and listen to the results of that prayer. The time has come to stop hiding your sin, and to start acknowledging it. The Christian life is all about you admitting who you are in light of who God is.**

Read Hosea 6

He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day, that we may live before Him. Hosea 6:2

The resurrection of Jesus is known by many for its main purpose, but it in fact has two. Jesus dying on the cross did not save us from our sins. Many people died on crosses, but Jesus had claimed that He would rise from the dead. When He kept that promise three days later, He was proven true and His death, burial and resurrection became the payment for those who believe. The other purpose to the resurrection is to assure us that resurrection is possible. Jesus didn't just say that we can live forever while remaining dead Himself. He became what He claimed for us.

Hosea 6:2 is the only place in Scripture that the mention of rising on the third day is found, before Jesus ever rose. The previous verse calls on the people of God to return to the Lord. Some may have worried that even if they returned, He may delay their rescue or restoration due to their sin. But, Hosea makes it clear that God will quickly raise His people up. That after two days, they will be revived and raised for a purpose: to live before God. So while this specifically is mentioned for Israel, there is no doubt that the comparison is also being drawn to the Lord Jesus Christ and His quick restoration. **Have you ever worried that repentance might be a long process? Have you feared that your sin is so great, that God is going to place you on a probationary period? That's not how grace works. God's desire is for us to repent: being sorry with a plan. He wants to see us change, and He is willing to help us, but we always have to take the most difficult step of choosing to change. So don't stay in your sin longer because you fear what God may do when you try to return. He wants you out of that sin, and into His arms. He accepts His children, so matter how long they have strayed.**

Read Hosea 7

So Ephraim has become like a silly dove, without sense; they call to Egypt, they go to Assyria. Hosea 7:11

Call in advice shows are completely pointless. I started listening to a well-known counselor on the radio and was initially impressed with her point blank assessment of many people's lives. She wasn't afraid to tell people who were living together that the source of their problems came from "shacking up". After a few months though, I began to notice that in similar situations her advice could vary. With no major differences she was leading people with the same problems to multiple answers. I often wondered how many people did exactly what the counselor said without ever giving it any thought of their own.

Getting outside advice is not a bad idea. Mindlessly accepting outside advice is. God says that Ephraim is like a silly dove calling out to everyone except God to protect them. A dove is noted for two big problems: they are easily caught and they are careless with their young. As a result, dove hunting is not really the most prestigious sport that you could ever be involved in. And as Christians, we often aren't any better than the average dove.

We know what Jesus did to save us from our sins, yet we find ourselves easily caught up in it. And we can be so careless with our younger generation, leaving them to learn about life on their own and failing to spiritually educate them. **How are you impacting the younger generation? If you have children, are you content to discipline them without disciplining them? Our children need to be taught about Jesus outside of the church walls. It needs to be made real in our homes. Or do you have an opportunity to impact young people in your church or neighborhood? Do the small things to let them know they are important. And finally, let's watch ourselves. Instead of allowing ourselves to be trapped by sin, let's prepare ourselves to stand against it. Rejecting sin is always better than repenting of sin.**

Read Hosea 8

They cry out to Me, "My God, we of Israel know You!" Hosea 8:2

Mike has bad knees, but he loves the Baltimore Ravens. His tickets are usually on the upper deck, and walking up the ramps is very tough on him. One evening at a social function, he met a lineman with the Ravens and Mike asked what it takes to get access to the elevators. This player mailed Mike a pass that he took to the next game. While Mike was waiting in the elevator line with his pass, one of the ushers noticed it and took him out of line right to the front and put him in the elevator. Other people were complaining that they had the same pass, but the usher didn't listen to them. When Mike got in the elevator he asked, "What kind of pass is this?" The usher said, "Sir, you can go anywhere in the stadium you want."

As I read this in Hosea, I immediately thought to Jesus' words in Matthew 7:21-23. Jesus said there would be many who stand before God telling Him that they belong in Heaven because of their deeds. But God says, "I never knew you." It's not about stuff, but it's about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The other people at the Ravens stadium all thought they had the same thing that Mike had, but they soon realized that they did not. Begging someone to know you won't help. Israel found it out, as they tried to rely on their standing as a nation, instead of coming to God broken and repentant. Don't try to work through your sin. Be honest about your failures before God and open yourself up to His plans for you life. **If you were to call upon God for help today, why do you think He would help you? Is it because of all the wonderful things you do for Him? We are so quick to pat ourselves on the back for our good deeds, when in reality good deeds are expected. It's a part of a changed life, and not worthy of trumpeting. So as you come before God today, be honest about who you are, and remember that you stand before Him because Jesus has made it possible.**

Read Hosea 9

They will not pour out drink offerings of wine to the LORD, their sacrifices will not please Him. *Their bread will be like mourners' bread; all who eat of it will be defiled, for their bread will be for themselves alone; it will not enter the house of the LORD.* Hosea 9:4

Over the years of my life, I've received few true gifts. Before you start crying for me, I don't mean I never got presents at Christmas or on my birthday, but those aren't really gifts in my mind. They were given because people were expected to give them. There was no spontaneous emotion behind it, but they gave because the calendar said it was time to give. Now I have received real gifts in my life. These were unexpected blessings from friends or family that were given "just because". Now those gifts make you feel special.

Unfortunately, many people look on the calendar to give their gifts to God. Perhaps they give the gift of church attendance on Easter and Christmas. Or they give a financial gift on Sundays. But what about on a normal, average Tuesday? What could we give God then? Israel's problem was that they were giving thoughtless gifts instead of meaningful sacrifices. They'd throw something God's way to keep Him on their side, never realizing that those worthless gifts were actually causing a rift in their relationship with God.

Remember back in Psalm 51:17 when David talked about the "sacrifices of God". These people were "giving" to God, but still looking many other places for their provision. Remember God wants brokenness and humility as we come to Him. He wants thoughtfulness as we give to Him, not just on Sundays, but everyday. What worthless things are you offering up to God, hoping to appease Him for your sin? What meaningful things has God been asking of you that you've been unwilling to give?

Read Hosea 10

Sow with a view to righteousness, reap in accordance with kindness ; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the LORD until He comes to rain righteousness on you. Hosea 10:12

I was about 15 when my parents decided they wanted to plant a vegetable garden in our backyard. My dad had this old front-tine tiller and he marked off about a 15x10 foot rectangle and told me to till it. Man, that ground was so dry and packed down that their old tiller nearly bounced me to death! I could barely hold onto it and so I finished that little plot and realized I hadn't really done much. The surface of the ground was disturbed, but my dad came out and looked at it and said the plowing hadn't gone deep enough. So he used a hoe to dig it up the plot deeper so that the seed and water could work more effectively.

I have heard this passage preached many times, but I now realize that it was never correctly studied. Preachers have said that the fallow ground was hard-packed, when in fact it had only been broken up on the surface. And if you read the first 9 chapters of Hosea, you realize that most of what Israel had done up to that point was shallow, surface level devotion. God says it's time for them to dig deeper and prepare for God's rain. He wants to rain righteousness on His people. When His righteousness rains down, we learn of the right that we should be doing. And when we have broken up the surface devotion and chosen to dig deeper in our relationship to God, He makes significant changes in our lives. **Why do you go through times of spiritual shallowness? Because you allow it. When I'm not seeking to know God in a deeper way, I never do. Let's stop doing the**

surface stuff of Christianity and let's begin really preparing ourselves to be used by God. Ask God what you can do to serve Him today. Ask God to show you people that you can reach today. Let us prepare ourselves!

Read Hosea 11

I led them with cords of a man, with bonds of love, and I became to them as one who lifts the yoke from their jaws and I bent down and fed them. Hosea 11:4

My uncle has a dairy farm, and I used to spend a lot of time there as a teenager. In the mornings I would help them with the chores and my favorite was always bottle-feeding the calves. Since their mothers' milk was being collected for human consumption, the calves are separated from their mothers fairly quickly. And twice a day, everyday, we had to mix up a formula and feed those calves with huge bottles of milk. After drinking they would stay up close and let you pet them and be near them, but once they grew older, it was as if they forgot all about their relationship to people and acted like cows generally act: scared and constantly running away.

God's relationship to Israel is not much different than my relationship to those calves. When Israel was young as a nation, God did everything for them. When they got to the Red Sea, He opened it for them. In the desert, short of food and water, He provided it. But now, generations later, despite all that God has done to care for them, they run from Him more than they ever run to Him. We run from God when we fail to recognize what He's done in our lives. I'm sure there were times I walked up to an adult cow I had fed as a calf, but never once did she say to the others, "It's OK, I know that guy." The cow had no recollection, just as we often have no recollection of how God has worked in our lives. **He doesn't just do the things we pray for, but He often does the things that we forgot to pray for. He's the one who preserves our lives at moments that we have forgotten to ask Him to do so. Take stock today and examine the many ways that God shows His love for you: through forgiveness, guidance in His will, daily provision. And as you see how God is and has taken care of you, offer Him thanks today for it.**

Read Hosea 12

Therefore, return to your God, observe kindness and justice, and wait for your God continually. Hosea 12:6

After speaking at a youth lock-in, I offered to talk to any teenagers who had questions or issues they wanted to discuss. A teenager girl came to me and said, "I don't really repent." I had explained the difference between being sorry and being repentant (I call it "sorry with a plan"). So we talked for a bit and I have been praying for her since. This young girl realized that as she turned to God, there should be some definite actions that would accompany that turning.

Hosea continues speaking to Israel, and in this verse he gives very practical advice for the life of a believer. When we are in sin, God wants us to come with more than "I'm sorry". He wants to see change in our lives as result of sin we have owned up to. Hosea says that

as the people of God return to Him, they should observe kindness and justice and wait for God. A forgiven believer should always be a person of kindness to others, especially those who may have wronged you. There is nothing worse than a mean Christian. I often hesitate to use those terms together, because it's hard to believe that a person could really be a follower of Christ, but treat people the exact opposite of Christ. We begin to realize that Christian isn't a title we give to ourselves, but is given by God. **What steps do you take when you recognize sin in your life? Do you turn back to God, or do remain in your guilt and shame? Think about the sin that you are struggling with the most right now. The next time you repent, what could you do differently to avoid that sin in the future? Are your sins coming from a lack of kindness and impartiality (justice) towards other people? Are you waiting on God, or is your impatience causing you to follow your own path...a path that usually ends with a quicksand trap of sin.**

Read Hosea 13

Yet I have been the LORD your God since the land of Egypt; And you were not to know any god except Me, for there is no savior besides Me. Hosea 13:4

Who was the movie executive who decided to stop using real twins and instead make actors play two parts? It was a nightmare in the 80's when I could always see that thin line where the director had clearly put two pieces of film together as one. Over the years, the technology has gotten better, but I'm always bothered to know that the same person is pretending to be someone else.

Some people are confused to think that Jesus is God. He makes it clear that He and the Father are one (John 10:30). Here is a statement of the Father to the same effect in the Old Testament. He is stressing the need of the people to serve Him as God. His reasoning is simple; you may find something else to set up as your God, but nothing can replace Him as Your Savior. It is important that we remember He is the only Savior. Those moments we waver on whether to obey or to disobey, are moments that we are negotiating on who gets to be God for the moment: us or Him. But the title of Savior can never be negotiated. **Nothing and no one else can preserve your life both here and for eternity. Understand that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all one and the same. When you waver in your devotion to do all that God has asked, remember that He is your everlasting Savior. Let that reminder be a reminder that leads us to reject the evil and embrace the good that Jesus died to bring into our lives.**

Read Hosea 14

I will heal their apostasy, I will love them freely, for My anger has turned away from them. Hosea 14:4

Walking down the cereal aisle as a kid was all about one thing: finding the cereal with the best toy inside! All the boxes offered a "free prize" inside, ranging from plastic cars to invisible ink pens. Years later, I'm the dad and I notice my kids will sometimes be attracted to cereal with a prize, but I'm old enough to realize those prizes aren't free! Just because they put them in there, doesn't mean I'm getting a bargain on the prize or the

cereal. It's just a gimmick to sell cereal, and for the most part, it works like a lucky charm!

Here we see more proof that God's love is not dependent on us. His perfect love comes because He's perfect. No matter how obedient or disobedient we may be, God's love for us is always the same. So do the actions of our life matter? While God may give his love freely, His blessings aren't. They are given as a gift as we move closer to His will for us. Loving us freely is a reminder that even when we are as far from God as we've ever been, He still wants us and has a desire for us. His love is not a gimmick, but truly is free to all. But, we must choose to accept that love. **Do you believe God loves you freely, or do you worry that He has some conditions for you? God's love is always available, but the lie of the devil is that you haven't earned it, or that you have out-sinned God's love and forgiveness for your life. God wants to heal you of your sin and your hurt. In times that you have been far from Him, never be afraid to come back. He loves you and is always ready to help you rekindle that relationship to Him.**