

HOSEA

THE PROPHECY

OF
A



HUSBAND FATHER

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men
by William M. Ramsay

Hosea

The Prophecy of a Husband and Father

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

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Hosea

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introduction

Men's BIBLE Study

The Reasons for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life . . .
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture.*

These words from “A Brief Statement of Faith,” adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God’s Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God’s Word” to each of us (*Book of Order*, PC(U.S.A.), G 14.0516).

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says; yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its president, Dr. Youngil Cho.

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men’s breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study cells in homes, and many more. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion it assumes a small group of men, no more than twelve, one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to do study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective:

1. We will treat no question as stupid. Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2. We will stick to the Scripture in this study. The group has gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas are.

3. We will regard the leader(s) as “first among equals.” Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning.

4. We will remember that we are here to hear God speak. Presbyterians believe that the Spirit which spoke to the biblical writers now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5. We will listen for “the question behind the question.” Sometimes a man’s gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6. We will agree to disagree in love. Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

7. We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study. Participation will involve making notes in the spaces provided for your own answers to questions relating to the study and from time to time sharing with others your answers, even when you worry that they are not the “right” answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of these seven “rules.”

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has been dealt with sufficiently. Or the leaders might alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of worksheets. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passages. Others are intended to help the student think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis of this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. When a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword. During the session the leader may call attention to things in the Afterword when they seem appropriate.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak, without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle or around a table rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? And (3) what does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study together God's word, in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study there are Scripture quotations. These are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout this study guide, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. A clock figure has been placed in each to suggest where a study might be divided into two sessions. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson exactly as suggested in this study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

Hosea

INTRODUCTION

Nobody knows for sure just why, but when the books of the minor prophets (the shorter books of prophecy) were collected, Hosea was always put first. It is not the longest. Chronologically it is not the first; Amos probably began preaching a short time before Hosea. It is not the most quoted book of prophecy in the New Testament. Perhaps the reason it has always been put first is this: we find it the richest in meaning. In his experience of being married to an unfaithful wife, losing her, rearing three children, but still loving that wife and trying to win her back, Hosea found parables of the grace of God. His figure of our covenant with God as a marriage and of God's people as God's bride, often unfaithful, was to be echoed throughout the Old Testament and on into the New. (See, for example, Isa. 62:5; Jer. 3:6–10; Ezek. 16:30–34; Eph. 5:25–33; Rev. 21:1–2.)

The Background of Hosea

Hosea's prophecies come to us from a time when the nation was in crisis, on the verge of catastrophic destruction. True, his first oracles (prophecies) were proclaimed in the prosperous days of King Jeroboam II. That king had reconquered much of the empire once ruled by Solomon, and to most Israelites, the future must have looked bright. Hosea's older contemporary, Amos, however, had already begun to warn of the destruction that would come a generation later. He denounced the government as being unconcerned for the poor, for widows, and for fatherless children. He warned that the gap between rich and poor was widening. God demands justice, especially for the poor. And since Israel had become an unjust society, Amos was sure that it was doomed.

Jeroboam died in 746 B.C., and the stability and prosperity of the nation came to an end. Within fourteen years, four Israelite kings were assassinated, with rivals seizing the throne. Israel was caught between Egypt, the great power of the past, and Assyria (modern Iraq), the rising conqueror from the east. At times the nation tried to survive by buying an alliance with one power and then switching, at what seemed the right moment, to the other. At times they attempted to form an alliance with Syria and other small nations to defend themselves against both of the major powers. But in 733, Assyria conquered and annexed most of Israel, leaving only the

capital, Samaria, and a small area around it. In 721, after a three-year siege, Samaria itself fell. The survivors—men, women, and children—were dragged off into slavery.

According to Hosea and Amos, however, Israel's basic problem was not military or political; it was spiritual. The Lord's shrines, with their golden-calf images, were crowded, it is true, but so were the shrines to the various Baals and their Asheras, their female consorts. The archaeologists have found such worship centers, which the Bible often refers to as "high places." A typical one might be built on a hill, with a small stone temple, an open courtyard, an altar for sacrifices, poles that may have been phallic symbols, images of Baal and his Ashera, and a shady grove. Here priests and priestesses welcomed worshipers.

To many readers of the Old Testament, the attraction Baal worship held for Israel seems a mystery. Why, when the Lord had rescued them from Egypt and had given them the Promised Land, did they repeatedly turn to Baal? There seem to have been at least three reasons.

1. Baal worship was the religion of Israel's neighbors. The first chapter of Judges makes clear that the Hebrews did not exterminate the Canaanites when they invaded the Promised Land. Instead, they settled down among these pagans. Soon they began to adopt their pattern of worship, or at least to add it to their own. The Israelites were not the last people to let conformity be their guide.

2. Baal worship offered prosperity. The invading Israelites had never been farmers. They learned from the Canaanites to plant grain at certain times, to cultivate it in certain ways, and to offer the prescribed sacrifices to Baal, the god of agriculture and nature, at appropriate seasons. Most of us can understand something of the appeal of gold over God.

3. Baal worship had few if any of those strict moral and ethical requirements that were basic to the law of the Lord. If you wanted good crops, you might go to the shrine of Baal and there have sexual intercourse with a prostitute priestess, or a priest if you preferred. As you did this on earth, Baal was supposed to mate with his Ashera, and your crops would germinate. Sometimes women went to the shrines and offered their bodies as sexual sacrifices to Baal. Baal had no Ten Commandments.

It was not that Israel completely abandoned the worship of the Lord for the worship of Baal. They simply worshiped both. But Hosea knew that such an act was spiritual adultery. His own tragic experience as the husband of an adulterous wife provided his most famous figure for the tragedy of Israel's unfaithfulness to God.

The Style of Hosea

It helps us in understanding Hosea to remember that he, like the other prophets, was a poet. Most modern translations print his words as poetry. In Hebrew they have meter. The lines do not rhyme sounds, but in a sense they “rhyme” ideas. Hebrews delighted in poetry in which an idea was repeated, but in different words. Here are two typical couplets:

My people consult a piece of wood,
and their divining rod gives them oracles.
For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray,
and they have played the whore, forsaking their
God (4:12).

Caught up in an ecstasy of inspiration, prophets sang or chanted their oracles.

Few other poets have used as imaginative and vivid a language as did Hosea. He compared God to a mother bear, a wild lion, a leopard, and a maggot (5:12; 13:7–8). He spoke of Israel as sick (5:13), a crooked businessman (12:7), a bird (7:11), a stubborn cow (4:16), an unborn child (13:13), a cake of bread (7:8), morning cloud (6:4), chaff, smoke, and dew (13:3).

The figure for which he is best remembered, however, is the one that grew out of his own domestic tragedy.

The Message of Hosea

The first three chapters of Hosea tell that story in a mixture of poetry and prose. The book shocks us with its opening sentence. “When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, ‘Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord’” (1:2). In his agony over his unfaithful wife, Hosea came to new understanding of God's agony over God's unfaithful people because Hosea still loved Gomer and bought her back from slavery. And God, Hosea knew, still loved Israel and sought to win them back. The first of this series of lessons reviews this story.

In another figure that would be imitated by later prophets, Hos. 4 pictures God as putting Israel on trial. The charges include “swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery” (4:2). We who read newspapers or watch the evening news on television will see parallels between ancient Israel and modern America as we study our second lesson.

The third session focuses on what is perhaps the key passage in the whole book, and Hosea's best-loved verse:

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings
(6:6).

By the time Hos. 7–8 was written, repeated assassinations had dramatized the political corruption of the nation. Session 4 reviews some of Hosea's condemnation of the government of his day, and it reminds us of what the realm of God was supposed to be. In that government, God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Does God really judge and punish individuals and nations? Hosea thought so. Session 5 centers on Hos. 10 and the warnings the prophet gave Israel in its last days, perhaps warnings Hosea still gives us.

But in chapter 11—one of the best-loved passages in all the books of the prophets—Hosea, having warned of God's judgment, pictures God as a tender, loving father. Session 6 looks at fatherhood, ours and God's. Our heavenly Father will no more give up on God's children than you would give up on your own.

And so the last session, like the last chapter of Hosea, is a lesson on hope. Hosea wrote that chapter when it was clear that Israel was soon to be destroyed. But Hosea still sings for us that the future is in the hands of a loving and powerful God.

In general, the chapters of Hosea seem to follow broadly a chronological sequence, but there is no clear, precise outline. The outline given below may be helpful simply as suggesting a rough overview of the book.

Some Additional Helps

For an excellent introduction, read the chapter on Hosea in Stephen Winward, *A Guide to the Prophets* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976).

Commentaries I have used most are:

James Luther Mays, *Hosea, a Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969).

James Limburg, *Hosea–Micah* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988).

Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

John Mauchline, *The Book of Hosea*, in Vol. 6 of *The Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956).

My own introduction of Hosea is found in my book *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

AN OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF HOSEA¹

God's Faithful Love for Israel, God's Unfaithful "Bride"

"For I desire steadfast love, and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (6:6).

1
HOSEA'S DOMESTIC
TRAGEDY: A SYMBOL OF
ISRAEL'S BROKEN
"MARRIAGE" TO GOD

Hosea marries a prostitute and gives their children symbolic names, 1

An appeal to the unfaithful wife, 2

He brings her back, redeems her, 3

4
ISRAEL'S UNFAITHFULNESS
TO GOD

Their spiritual unfaithfulness, 4–6

Their political unfaithfulness, 7–10

God's continuing faithful love for God's people, 11–13

14
A CLOSING APPEAL

Return to God, 14:1–3

God will forgive, 14:4–9

Date: From about 750 to 721 B.C.

Place: Israel, the Northern Kingdom

Theme: As Hosea still sought to win back his faithless wife, so God still seeks to win back faithless Israel.

Special Significance: Throughout the rest of the Bible, New Testament as well as Old, God's covenant love for God's people is compared to the love of husband and wife.

1. From *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*, by William M. Ramsay (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), p. 226.

session

When a Prophet AND GOD MARRIED PROSTITUTES

Hos. 1—3

Introduction: A Tragic Marriage

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Hosea is not just a story of a dysfunctional family. It is not about a no-fault divorce. This is a story about ugly sin, about unfaithfulness in marriage, about adultery, and about prostitution. It is also the story of a broken-hearted husband who would not give up on his wife—and a broken-hearted God who will not give up on us.

This is the story of the prophet Hosea, the story of God, and the story of us. Today we begin study of the book that tells that story.

“The word of the Lord that came to Hosea . . . in the days of King Jeroboam”—so the first verse dates the book. Life in Israel in 750 B.C. must have seemed good. Second Kings 14:23–29 tells us that powerful King Jeroboam “restored the border of Israel.” That is a euphemism for saying that by bloody wars, he reconquered most of the empire Solomon had once held. He even defeated Syria, still Israel’s enemy today. And he did it all with the blessing of that ultranationalist prophet Jonah. Militarily Israel seemed powerful. Politically, they seemed stable—Jeroboam II ruled for forty-one years. Their economy seemed to be booming, at least for the rich. And they were certainly religious. They boasted that they had the God of Moses on their side, and not only that God but Baal too.

Named for the king who, two centuries earlier, had set up shrines to golden calves, Jeroboam II gave state support to places of prayer. Hilltop shrines (“high places”) dotted the landscape. The Lord and Baal might be worshiped there, because what did it matter what you called God, so long as you were sincere? Baal was the God of fertility. And so, if you wanted good crops, you might come to the shrine and there mate with a prostitute priestess—or a male prostitute, if you preferred. As you did so, in heaven Baal had sex with his mistress Astarte. Now, magically, your crops would be fertilized. You satisfied your lust, and your prosperity was assured.

Probably speaking of one of those prostitutes, God gave the prophet Hosea this strange command, “Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom” (1:2). Some scholars, it is true, believe that the Bible cannot mean quite what it says here. They propose that God told Hosea to marry a woman, Gomer, who *later* became a prostitute. But most

stick to a literal reading of the story here. God had a reason: “for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord” (1:2). Yet God still loved and clung to hope for these people.

Sometimes advertisers do outrageous things to dramatize their message. Many years ago, a shoe polish manufacturer managed to paint this sign in big letters on the great pyramid of Egypt, “TRY WARREN’S BLACKING, 30 STRAND, LONDON.” Outraged, newspapers all over England denounced this desecration of that ancient monument. And so, all over England, people heard of, and began to buy, Warren’s Blacking.¹

Hosea’s method of advertising was shocking too. But his message was even more startling. He was saying that Israel, God’s people, had been so unfaithful to the Lord that they had become, in effect, a prostitute!

But Hosea’s shocking ways of presenting his message did not end with his marriage. Everywhere the three children soon born to his wife Gomer went, their very names voiced Hosea’s message of judgment. The first was named Jezreel. “Why that strange name?” people would ask the child. “Because God will punish the royal family for their mass murders at Jezreel,” he was to reply. It was by such slaughter that they had secured the throne (1:4; compare 2 Kings 9:30—10:37). The next child would go through life explaining that her name was Not-Pitied, because, her father said, God would no longer have pity on Israel (1:6). And the baby would be called “Not-My-People,” because, God announced through Hosea, “You are [no longer] my people and I am not your God” (1:9). Not only Hosea’s method, but his message was so shocking that someone wrote it down, so remarkable that you are still reading it today.

Hosea cared for that wife. But, like Israel, she forgot her marriage covenant. She became unfaithful, an adulteress. Hosea still “gave her . . . grain . . . wine . . . oil, and . . . lavished upon her silver and gold” (2:8). In chapter 2 the heart-broken husband begs the children to plead with their mother to return. It is to no avail. And in the same way, through the prophet, the heart-broken God pleads with Israel to return—to no avail. So what will God do now?



Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Hos. 2:14-15. Therefore, the passage begins, since God's people, like Hosea's wife, have been unfaithful, God will take action. We think we know what the Old Testament God will do: destroy these sinners in wrathful judgment! Instead, what does God say? Note your answers with a pen or pencil.

Long before, during their forty years in the wilderness under Moses, God had made a covenant with Israel. But when the Hebrews at last entered the Promised Land, almost immediately they broke their covenant at a valley called Achor (Josh. 7:20-26). Note the promise God now makes about Achor as the Lord seeks to restore the people after a new time in a kind of new "wilderness."

Now read 2:16. What do you suppose God means by rejecting the title "Baal" (which means "Master") and telling Israel instead to call the Lord "My Husband"?

How many ways can you suggest that God's covenant with us is like marriage promises?

Why, do you suppose, does Hosea speak of nature and of war in relation to our covenant with God (2:18)?

How would you have felt if you had heard Hosea's words in 2:19-20?

How do you feel now, as you read them?



LOVE'S SACRIFICE AND ANOTHER CHANCE (HOS. 3)

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Between the lines of the third chapter of Hosea, one can read a moving story. Apparently Gomer has gone from bad to worse. Now, perhaps no longer attractive enough to be kept by a lover or to seduce men in a shrine for Baal, she has sunk as low as a woman could go. She has sold herself into slavery.

Down Hosea goes to the slave market. There he finds Gomer. (The chapter does not explicitly state that the slave is Gomer, but the parallelism demands it.) She is displayed on the auction block. Other men make jokes about her. Perhaps she is forced to expose what figure she has left in order to encourage buyers. And Hosea recognizes that the woman up for sale is his wife.

We feel sure what God will say to Hosea: "It serves her right!" Instead, God says, "Go love her" (3:1)! Try to imagine the humiliation Hosea endures. It seems impossible now to determine exactly the equivalent in dollars and cents of the price Hosea pays to buy Gomer back. But we can guess at something of the price in shame and suffering he has been through. And so he makes the sacrifice. He outbids all others. He pays the price. He brings her home again. And through this act, God makes promises once more to Israel.

Now read the story for yourself (Hos. 3), and with a pencil or pen note your answers to these questions.

What do you think is meant by the command to love this woman “just as the Lord loves the people of Israel” (3:1)?

Do you find any hint about why God does not destroy Israel, though they “turn to other gods and love raisin cakes” (feasts of Baal) (3:1)?

Why do you suppose Hosea seems to put Gomer on a kind of probation “for many days” (3:3–4)? How, if ever, does God do that with us?

Do you really think we are as faithless to God as Gomer was to Hosea? If so, how?

What does faithfulness to our marriage vows require?

What has God done to win us back?

Afterword

Here are the traditional vows a man takes when he is married:

I, (name), take you, (name), to be my wife;
and I promise,
before God and these witnesses,
to be your loving and faithful husband;
in plenty and in want;
in joy and in sorrow;
in sickness and in health;
as long as we both shall live.²

How well have we lived up to our vows to God and to our wives?

Marc Connelly’s play *The Green Pastures* dramatizes the story of the Bible as preached by an African American, weak in formal education but strong in faith. In it the Lord becomes so frustrated with humankind that the only course left seems to be to wipe them out. But in one more walk on earth, God encounters a man who describes to the Lord “the God of Hosea.” “Who’s he?” “The God of Mercy,” the man replies, “not that old God of wrath.” “How do you suppose Hosea found that mercy?” the Lord asks. “The only way he could find it. The only way I found it. The only way anyone can find it.” “How’s that?” “Through suffering.” God becomes quiet and pensive. “Mercy. [a pause] Through suffering,” he says. And now in the final scene, God and the angels look out over the battlements of heaven. As they do so, a voice cries, “O, look at him. O, look, they’re going to make him carry it up that high hill! They’re going to nail him to it. Oh, that’s a terrible burden for one man to carry!” God cries, “Yes!” And suddenly all the angelic chorus is singing, “Hallelujah, King Jesus.”³

2. *Book of Common Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 845.

3. Marc Connelly, *The Green Pastures: A Fable* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958), part II, scenes 7, 8, pp. 166–173. I have paraphrased slightly to replace the 1920s dialect with standard English.

Bittersweet

I stand before you trembling in my nakedness for I
know that
without the trappings of my ego I have no defenses
I stand before you with the fear of rejection racing
through
my heart since I have torn down my fences

Do not meet my gaze unless you are willing to accept the
truth that lies within my heart
For it can no more be suppressed than the shining of
the sun
can be made to stop or start

I pose no threat, for I come clothed only in the
innocence of
love and the honesty of my emotions
If fear be present it comes from “self” and its illusions;
choose love as “self’s” soothing lotion

The oneness we attain in union fans the embers of
desire and
opens my eyes to the wonders within your soul
The limitless pool of possibilities that explodes upon my
awareness when we are one makes loving you my goal

I offer my “self” to you as I have never done for anyone or
anything since entering this world of desire
Accept this chalice of “self” and drink from it till your
thirst is slaked, for it holds the flame of love’s fire

I come to you in the hope that you will gaze upon my
soul and
find the seeds of your own fulfillment and destiny
For I have found in my heart of hearts that only
through love
can I have the courage to be the best that I can be.⁴

Looking Ahead

Read Hos. 4 and see the ways Israel—and we—are
unfaithful to God.

4. Robert F. Wilbert III, “Bittersweet.” Used by permission of the author.

session *two*

When God Put Men ON TRIAL

Hos. 4

Evidence for the Prosecution (Hos. 4:1–3)

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Hosea is a book of divine double-talk. It is hard to tell whether the prophet is talking about our adulterous unfaithfulness to God or about literal adultery by men with women. If you are having trouble making that distinction, congratulations! You are understanding Hosea very well; he is talking about both. We were “married” to God by covenant vows and have been unfaithful. One result of unfaithfulness to God is that marital infidelity is all too common. And that is only one symbol of our sins.

The first three chapters of Hosea present the prophet’s message in a shocking figure: Israel is like an unfaithful wife. God’s people had “turned aside” to Baal. Those first chapters are based on the prophet’s own tragic marriage. Gomer, his wife, proved unfaithful. Just so, Israel, he charged, was unfaithful to God. But Hosea bought his wife back from prostitution and slavery, and he still loves her. And so, he promised, God loves us and seeks to buy us back again.

Personally, my own reaction tends to be like that of Hosea’s hearers: flat denial. We today don’t seem *that* guilty. How have we committed spiritual “adultery”?

Unfortunately for our peace of mind, the fourth chapter of Hosea spells out his charges in disturbing detail. The prophet “tells it like it is.” “The Lord,” he says, “has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land” (4:1). “Indictment,” “contend,” “accuse,” “law,”—the first poems of this chapter use legal language. We are put on trial, and the prosecuting attorney is the Lord.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

God’s first charge against us is for crimes of omission, three general virtues we have not practiced. “There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land” (4:1). Which of these three seems to you to be most lacking among us today?

- faithfulness (to God)*
- loyalty (to our families and others for whom we are responsible)?*
- knowledge (of God and of what God requires)?*

Why did you pick the one you chose?

But now, in 4:2, God condemns a whole series of specific crimes we have done. The list is much like the prohibitions in the Ten Commandments. Which of these can you tell about that you personally have seen or that has affected the life of someone you know?

swearing (cursing)

lying

murder

stealing

adultery

One result, God says through the prophet, is that “bloodshed follows bloodshed.” Can you give an example of how violence breeds violence?

But it is not just human beings who are destroyed by our sin. Read 4:3. Can you give an example of how our greed is destroying even animals or birds or fish?

Why should we be concerned about them?



GUILTY PEOPLE, GUILTY PRIEST (HOS. 4:4–10)

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

It is likely that Hosea delivered this indictment standing on the steps of King Jeroboam’s royal shrine at Bethel. Shocked, the royal priest must have begun to denounce the prophet and to defend his people. (For a similar dispute, see Amos 7:10–17.) And so Hosea turns on the priest himself. “My people,” God accuses him, “are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. . . . You have forgotten the law of your God” (4:6).

The basic cause of the sins destroying Israel, Hosea knows, is that the people have forsaken God and forgotten God’s law. At least part of the blame for that must lie with priests and prophets. Their job is to teach what God has done and the law God has given. But they are corrupt, and so the people are corrupt. “Like people, like priest” (4:9).

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Here are a list of things many churches look for when calling a pastor. Which two do you think your church would be most careful to make sure the new minister will have, and which two are likely to seem less important?

- _____ personal attractiveness
- _____ short, peppy sermons
- _____ theological orthodoxy
- _____ interest in the educational program
- _____ friendliness
- _____ sermons based clearly on Scripture
- _____ youth
- _____ good business sense
- _____ go-getter energy
- _____ money-raising talent
- _____ meaningful leadership in worship
- _____ avoidance of controversy
- _____ “success” elsewhere
- _____ other: _____

Why did you pick the ones you chose?

Which do you think Hosea would pick and why?

“Like people, like priest.” Pastors affect congregations. How does your congregation affect its pastor?

Wine, Women, and Guilty Men (Hos. 4:11–19)

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Hosea was ready to place some blame on priests who fail to teach people the law of God. But in 4:11–19 he returns to the theme of sexual immorality. Baal worship included mating with prostitute priestesses, or priests if one preferred. Women, too, might offer their bodies as sexual sacrifices to Baal. In the outdoor shrines men and women “make offerings upon the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth. . . . Therefore your daughters play the whore, and your daughters-in-law commit adultery” (4:13). We expect the prophet to denounce these women. Amazingly, God

says, "I will not punish your daughters when they play the whore." Why? "For the men themselves go aside with whores" (4:14). No more double standard! The men themselves must be held responsible for what is done. Once again he associates alcohol with sexual promiscuity. "When their drinking is ended, they indulge in sexual orgies" (4:18).

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

When a couple has sex outside of marriage, which one is to blame?

- _____ *the woman*
- _____ *the man*
- _____ *both*

There are 1.5 million abortions every year. Everyone agrees that this fact is horrible. Many want to imprison the doctors and perhaps the women involved. Without getting into that controversial issue, what do you think should be done about the men who get these women pregnant?

Most of us believe that divorce is sometimes a tragic necessity. But is there really such a thing as a "no-fault" divorce?

What should the church do about the fact that half of all marriages in this country end in divorce?

We are used to saying that there is nothing wrong with moderate drinking and that immoderate drinking is alcoholism, a disease for which the victim is no more responsible than he or she might be for contracting pneumonia. Almost all agree that alcohol is one drug that should be kept legal. What are we to make of Hosea's relating drinking to sin?

Afterword

"American society continues to spin out of control toward ruin, former education secretary William Bennett [warned], releasing a list of social indicators such as teen births, crime and education performance. 'Unless it's corrected, it may bring this country to ruin,' Bennett said at a news conference to unveil his second annual Index of Leading Cultural Indicators. . . . 'What we're looking at in American society is an increasingly large number of morally stunted and morally disabled people . . . those who never learned to tell right from wrong. . . . Seventy percent of the juveniles in long-term detention grew up without fathers in their families.' Since 1960, out-of-wedlock births have increased more than 400 percent. . . . Since 1965, the juvenile arrest rate for violent crimes has tripled. . . . Scholastic Aptitude Test scores (SAT) among all students has dropped 73 points from 1960 to 1993."¹

"The birth rate for unmarried women has surged since 1980, with the rate for white women nearly doubling. The overall rate is up more than 50 percent, [to] 1.2 million babies." The report gives no hint that there may be any unmarried fathers.²

Reporting on "the drug that's legal," columnist Anna Quindlen writes, "Binge drinking is the No. 1 substance abuse problem in American college life. The widespread use of alcohol at nearly every American school affects everything from the prevalence of venereal disease to the failure rate. Ninety percent of all reported campus rapes occur when either the victim or the assailant has been drinking. At least one in five college students abandons safe sex practices when drunk that they would use when sober. Two-thirds of college suicide victims were legally intoxicated at the time of death. . . . There are 18.5 million people with alcohol problems and only 5 million drug addicts. More people who commit crimes are drunk than high."³

Looking Ahead

Memorize Hos. 6:6, the theme verse of this book.

1. As reported by Gannett News Service in the *Jackson Sun*, Feb. 9, 1994.

2. The National Center for Health Statistics, as reported by the Associated Press in the *Jackson Sun*, June 7, 1995.

3. Anna Quindlen, syndicated columnist for *The New York Times*, "The Drug That's Legal," as found in *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June 14, 1994.

session *three*

What God

REALLY WANTED

Hos. 5:8—6:6

When a Hymn Did Not Help (Hos. 5:8—6:5)

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

“Blow the horn . . . Sound the alarm! . . . Ephraim shall become a desolation” (Hos. 5:8–9). Suddenly, with these verses, the book of Hosea moves to a new, desperate period in Hebrew history. The relative peace and prosperity in which the first four chapters of Hosea were written is over. Powerful king Jeroboam II is dead, and the nation is falling apart. All Hosea’s warnings are coming true. In fifteen years, or less, Israel, the Northern Kingdom, will be wiped out. Already “Ephraim is . . . crushed in judgment” (5:11).

Second Kings 15–17 summarizes the tragic history of the time. Jeroboam II ruled forty-one years, and Israel seemed to prosper. But with his death there was a miserable series of petty tyrants. Zechariah, Jeroboam’s son, reigned only six months before he was assassinated. Shallum, his assassin, lasted just one month before he was murdered. Menahem, who killed Shallum, held the throne for ten years, but only by paying huge tribute to mighty Assyria, the most cruel empire of the ancient world. Two years after Menahem’s death, Pekah assassinated the next king.

Pekah, however, made the mistake of invading Judah, the Southern Kingdom. His plot backfired. Judah counter-attacked, invading weak Israel. Its military leaders began to “remove the landmark” (5:10), that is, they crossed the border and seized some of Pekah’s territory.

So what about God as all this was happening to God’s people? No other prophet ever used figures of speech quite like Hosea. He said God was like maggots and that God was like dry rot (5:12)! God was slowly eating away at decaying Israel. Or God was like a lion tearing Israel apart like a beast of prey (5:14). And now, Hosea pictured God as saying, “I will return again to my place” (5:15). God was going to abandon God’s own people!

“In their distress they will beg my favor,” the Lord predicts (5:15). And they do. Hosea 6:1–3 is their song, a kind of liturgy or hymn that Israel is pictured as singing as a result of these terrifying events. So as you read it, imagine pilgrims coming to Bethel. They pray all the right prayers. Poor as they are, they offer lambs and even bullocks as sacrifices to the Lord. And together they sing this cheerful song of assurance that God will quickly restore them. They are optimistic. Confidently they wait for God to answer.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read this lovely song in 6:1–3. What good things do you find in it?

What, if anything, do you find lacking in this song, things that perhaps Israel ought to have said?

What startles us is this: God, though hearing these words, seems unimpressed. How does God feel, as suggested by 6:4? (When I misbehaved, my mother used to sigh with those same words, “What am I going to do with you?”)

Why is God so frustrated with Israel, in spite of their beautiful prayer (6:4)?

God offers us free grace. Israel’s song in 6:1–3 may be an example of what martyred theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer denounced as counting on “cheap grace.” What do you think is the difference?



THE HEART OF HOSEA (HOS. 6:6)

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

If you don't learn anything else from the prophecy of Hosea, learn Hos. 6:6. It is a theme verse for this book. Commentator James M. Ward calls it "the most brilliant proclamation of the judging demand of God in the entire literature of ancient Israel."¹

God does indeed command songs and sacrifices. But Hosea summarizes what God *really* wants. It is simply two things: steadfast love and knowledge of God. Neither songs nor sacrifices nor anything else can substitute for these two.

1. *Steadfast love*—Most Christians know two Hebrew words. *Amen* is a cry of assent, as the congregation joins in at the end of a prayer. And *hallelujah* means "Praise the Lord." But another Hebrew word is worth learning: *hesed*. The King James Version translates it as "mercy." Other translations say "kindness," "loyalty," "true love," or "devotion." It is lasting love related to the covenant, a three-way relationship. God has *hesed* toward God's people. We are to respond with *hesed* toward God. And we are to have *hesed* toward our neighbors. *Hesed* is the love Hosea still had for his wife, even when she was unfaithful (2:19). Israel's love faded as quickly as the morning mist (6:4). But Ps. 136 taught God's people to chant over and over that the Lord's *hesed* endures forever.

2. *Knowledge of God*—Clearly, Hosea wanted to make sure that Israel knew the story of what God had done for them, how God had rescued them from Egypt, had made the covenant with them, and had given them the Promised Land. But *knowledge* of God involved not only the mind but the whole personality. It involved a relationship. In fact the Bible sometimes uses the word *to know* as a symbol for the sexual relationship itself. Knowing God involves action. "By this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments" (1 John 2:3).

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Sacrifices and burnt offerings were Israel's substitute for steadfast love and knowledge of God. We never offer sacrifices and burnt offerings. What would you say are our favorite substitutes?

How do Jesus' words in Matt. 9:10–13 help you understand Hos. 6:6?

What does Jesus' use of this verse in Matt. 12:1–7 add?

What is the most important thing in life? Hosea 6:6 gives our prophet's answer. Without using either of his words, how would you answer that question? (It is enormously important!)

1. James M. Ward, *Hosea: A Theological Commentary* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1966), p. 120.

Afterword

In the motion picture *Dead Man Walking*, for which she won an Academy Award, Susan Sarandon plays the role of Sister Helen Prejean. She has become a spiritual advisor to a convicted rapist and murderer played by Sean Penn. He is awaiting execution. She persuades him to read the Bible. Eventually, he gives what might seem a gratifying profession of faith: “Me and God—we got our thing squared away. I know Jesus died on the cross for me. And I know Jesus is gonna be there for me when I appear before God on the judgment day.” But Sister Helen knows that that kind of “faith,” lacking real repentance, will bring no more salvation than did Israel’s song in Hos. 6:1–3. Not until he has confessed his sin, taken responsibility for it, and begged forgiveness can his soul be saved.

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness [*hesed*], and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).

Here are the covenant vows you take when you become a Presbyterian:

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

I do.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?

I do.

Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?

I will, with God’s help.

(You then profess your faith, perhaps using the Apostles’ Creed.)

Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and ministry through your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

I will, with God’s help.

Will you devote yourself to the church’s teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers?

I will, with God’s help.²

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” [Jesus] said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:36–40).

Looking Ahead

“They made kings, but not through me” (Hos. 8:4).
Hosea believed God was concerned about Israel’s politics.
What does Hos. 8 suggest about ours?

2. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 407–410.

session *four*

God and

THE GOVERNMENT

Hos. 7—8; Ps. 72

A Man-Made Kingdom (Hos. 7—8)

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

A nation can fail to recognize and accept its big chance. Israel did it. So may we.

In a sense, the Old Testament is the story of a kind of noble experiment. Israel was to be the kingdom of God. “You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation,” God told Israel at Sinai (Ex. 19:6). God made a covenant with these people. Their law would be the Ten Commandments. But they never grasped the opportunity before them.

American democracy has been called “a noble experiment.” The pilgrims on the Mayflower saw the new world as a kind of second chance at something like the kingdom of God. In our democracy, what the government becomes is up to us citizens. Christian citizens, therefore, should listen to Hosea’s commentary. His poems were sung in the last, sad days of the kingdom, not of God, but of Israel. Perhaps, however, they are also a message for us.

You have probably noticed by now that Hosea, like most of the prophets, did not speak just to individuals about how to live their private lives. He spoke to the nation as a whole. He was a commentator, in some ways like Andy Rooney or David Brinkley or others you see on television or read in the newspapers. But he commented from a particular point of view, the covenant between Israel and God.

Hosea 7 was probably written around 733 B.C. Two hundred years before, with bloody civil war, God’s people had divided into Judah and Israel (or Ephraim), the Northern Kingdom. Jeroboam I had set up golden calves in shrines at each end of his nation. In its 233 years, ten different dynasties held the throne; each in turn was slaughtered. When Hosea was writing, in the space of just fourteen years, four kings were assassinated. Switching alliances back and forth between Assyria and Egypt, Israel’s foreign policy was no more based on the concept of right and wrong than was its domestic politics. The nation was so weakened that by 733 Assyria had annexed much of Israel and was poised to capture the rest.

Hosea 7:1–7 is so difficult to translate that a number of experts in Hebrew have conjectured that it has been garbled in copying. But it does give us glimpses of the government of Israel when it was written. Hosea regards the last group of assassins who have seized the throne as criminals, gangsters who have broken into the palace and grabbed power. “They deal falsely, the thief breaks in, and the bandits raid outside” (7:1). The king actually enjoys crime, and so do his officials (7:3). He “stretched out his hand with mockers” (7:5), in a drunken orgy mocking those whom his gang hates (7:5–6). “All night their anger smolders” (7:6).

The poem begins with God pleading, “I would heal Israel,” if given a chance (7:1). But, it ends, “All their kings have fallen [because] none of them calls upon me” (7:7). Moral and political decay (7:1–7) is the background for the warning in 8:1–10. To those verses we now turn.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Why do you suppose 8:1 calls for a trumpet blast?

The “vulture” (8:1) is probably Assyria, which has annexed much of Israel and is extracting heavy tribute from the rest. Why, according to Hosea, is Israel experiencing this oppression?

In 8:2 Israel professes its faith. Why, according to 8:3, does that not bring God’s favor?

Ironically, it is on our coins that America professes its faith: "In God we trust." What similarity, if any, is there between our profession and Israel's?

In light of the history of Israel as reviewed above, what would you suppose is meant by God's complaint about the way they have made kings (8:4)?

Thank God, we do not literally assassinate presidents in order to gain the presidency. Negative campaigning and dirty tricks are a partial substitute. It takes \$40 million to run for nomination for president, and, if nominated, about \$40 million more to be elected. In many districts election to congress costs a million dollars. What changes, if any, do we need to make to improve the process by which one gains high office?

A fascinating suggestion made by the historians is that the silver and gold idols Hosea denounces in 8:4-5 were originally set up as shrines not to Baal but to the Lord. Is there anything here suggestive for our own nation?

A basic complaint is that Israel has become a man-made nation, worshipping (putting first in its life) its own man-made gods (8:4-6). What ways can you think of that Hosea's words may apply to us?

In what sense, if any, have we have trusted in armaments and the things we have made in the ways Hosea describes in 10:13-14?



THE KINGDOM OF GOD (Ps. 72)

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Hosea's message was not all negative. Positively, God still wanted Israel to be the kingdom of God. There was still hope, if they would "hold fast to love [*hesed*] and justice [*mishpat*]" (12:6).

Some Hebrews thought that having any king or earthly government was a sin. When, in the days of the judges, people tried to make Gideon king, he refused. "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you" (Judges 8:23). When the people pleaded with Samuel to anoint them a king, he at first refused, warning them that having a king meant loss of freedom. God is pictured as only grudgingly agreeing to the establishment of a monarchy: "They have rejected me from being king over them" (1 Sam. 8:7). Rightly, Americans, too, have rejected the idea of a king or a dictator.

It would be going too far, however, to suggest that the Bible rejects the idea of having any human government at all. Deuteronomy, a kind of constitution for Judah, assumed the eventual establishment of a monarchy, though it placed careful restrictions on any human king (Deut. 17:14-20). The earthly king was to remember the law of the God who "is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing" (Deut. 10:17-18). At the inauguration of new kings, prophets and psalmists sometimes sang songs of hope, telling what a godly government on earth might be like. One such song is Ps. 72. See what it suggests for our country.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

What seem to be the chief functions of human government, as far as you can tell from Ps. 72:1-4?

For whom is the government to be especially concerned to provide justice?

What do verses 12–14 add to this picture of the ideal government?

What kinds of laws would America need to approximate this ideal more nearly?

Hosea pleaded for “love and justice” (12:6). Someone has defined justice as “love writ large,” that is, active concern distributed impartially and equally to all. When, if ever, in our history has the government demonstrated this kind of justice?

Afterword

A contemporary of Hosea, Amos, announced that God was saying, “I hate, I despise your festivals. . . . But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream” (Amos 5:21–24).

Another contemporary pleaded with the Southern Kingdom, Judah, “Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isa. 1:17; cf. Isa. 3:14). He dreamed of the ideal king, “With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth” (Isa. 11:4).

“Census report shows trend of economic inequality on rise. Despite the growth of the economy, the typical household saw its income decline in 1993, and more than a million Americans fell into poverty, the Census Bureau said Thursday. . . . The report showed record levels of inequality, with the top fifth of households earning 48.2 percent of the income, while the bottom fifth earned 3.6 percent.”¹

“Three fifths of all households in 1994 did not even keep up with inflation relative to their 1973 counterparts, while the top 5% were awarded a \$56,000 pay raise.’ People who own stocks and bonds are profiting. Yet, ‘42% of all marketable assets rest in the hands of a select group that holds a minimum of \$2.3 million per family.’ ”²

“Families with children now account for about 43% of the homeless, up from about 33% in previous years, the U.S. Conference of Mayors said Tuesday.”³

“Fully 40 percent of pregnant black and Hispanic women fail to obtain prenatal care during the critical first trimester. . . . The death rate for blacks still is more than twice that of whites.”⁴

“Pray then in this way . . . Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. . . . Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt. 6:9–10, 33).

Looking Ahead

Apparently only one in five Presbyterian men think that God ever punishes anybody. What do you think? What did Hosea think?

1. *New York Times* News Service, as reported in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, Oct. 7, 1994.

2. Jane Anderson, “Two Different Americas” in the *Nashville Tennessean*, Jan. 28, 1996, quoting *U.S. News & World Report*.

3. As reported in the *Jackson Sun*, Dec. 22, 1993.

4. Annual report of the Department of Health and Human Services, as reported by Gannett News Service in the *Jackson Sun*, Sept. 16, 1993.

session

five

Justice from the

GOD OF LOVE

Hos. 10

Punishment by the God of Love

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

“I will come against the wayward people to punish them” (Hos. 10:10). So the God of Hosea threatens. Perhaps many of us are inclined to think that in such words this Old Testament prophet is expressing an outmoded idea of God.

Presbyterians have never done their theology by conducting polls, but a careful survey of members of mainline churches, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), tells us that here is what we seem to believe about God:

About 92 percent of adults say they are certain God exists. But they’re less sure how to describe God. . . . When asked about God’s attributes, mainline adults tend to believe God is forgiving (97%); is loving (96%); accepts them as they are (86%). . . They are much less likely to believe that God is judging (37%) . . . mysterious (36%) . . . punishes those who do wrong (19%).¹

Hosea is surely a prophet of God’s love. He himself had loved an unworthy wife and had paid the price to bring her back to himself in forgiving love. He pictured God as having the same kind of steadfast love for God’s sinful, unfaithful people. But Hosea warns of punishment.

Hosea 10:9–15 involves a figure of speech, a kind of parable taken from a Palestinian farm. A farmer had a young cow he was fond of. He used the cow to thresh his grain by walking over it, eating when it wished. The cow loved it! But when that heifer grew a little older and was told to pull the plow, it was a different story. In the same way, Israel had rebelled and “plowed wickedness.” What will be the result?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

First, go over the survey reported above and by each item with which you agree, mark +, and by each with which you disagree, mark –.

“Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love” (10:12). This is God’s command. To what extent do you feel that it is also fact: if you sow righteousness you will reap love?

- agree
- disagree
- agree partly, in this way

but disagree partly, in this way

“You have plowed wickedness, you have reaped injustice” (10:13). To what extent do you feel that it is a fact: if you plow wickedness you will reap injustice?

- agree
- disagree
- agree partly, in this way

but disagree partly, in this way

Now look over Hos. 10. In how many places can you find Hosea warning that God is going to judge, even punish, God’s people?

In the survey quoted above, mark “X” beside each item with which you think Hosea would agree. In 5:10 Hosea can even speak of the “wrath” of God.

1. Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 44.



**“AS YOU SOW,
SO SHALL YOU REAP”**

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

It is important to remember that Hosea’s warnings were chanted in the last, sad days of Israel, the Northern Kingdom. In 721 B.C. all his prophecies of judgment did come true. Second Kings 17 tells the horrible story. Assyria had already annexed much of Israel. Now, for three years, their armies laid siege to Samaria, the capital. At last, starvation forced their surrender. They were carried off into slavery by their conquerors, and they never returned. Only Judah (the Southern Kingdom) survived. The biblical writers are sure that this fate befell Israel, not because their God was too weak to defend them, but because God was judging them as unfaithful.

How can the God of love punish, and in what ways does God do it? Perhaps in wrestling with this problem we may need to recover the unpopular idea that God is mysterious. There is mystery in God’s blending of justice and mercy. Hosea says “sowing” the seeds of disobedience will cause us to “reap” the judgment of God.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Here are some consequences of disobedience that Hosea describes. Make a note by any of these that you yourself have observed and can tell about:

the devastation of war, (10:13–15)

political chaos (10:3)

“litigation . . . like poisonous weeds” (10:4)

religion that proves useless (10:5–6)

the pollution of nature (4:3)

the horrors described in 4:2

Now go back, and with each of these note, if you can, what sin you think is likely to bring about this particular consequence or punishment.

The mystery of the relationship of God’s judgment to God’s love is not dissolved but heightened by the cross of Christ. But see if you can suggest ways in which these two come together in the cross.

Afterword

“There is always a certain ‘hell to pay’ (to use a familiar phrase) when men practice their sin of economic exploitation, racial domination, sexual lust, and national imperialism, violating the law of love in whatever way they do. . . . [God] is not mocked. ‘Whatever a man sows, he reaps.’ If he sows the wind of hate, he reaps the whirlwind of warfare. God’s judgment is in the backlash. This trust in God as Judge is not something at all opposed to ‘scientific’ thinking, immune from investigation. It is open to testing by a psychologist, sociologist, political scientist, or historian. Any social scientist can provide ample illustrations of the phenomenon of ‘judgment,’ even though he may use only natural categories.”²

“In the teachings of Jesus, again contrary to popular misconception, the wrath of God played a prominent role. By actual count, there are almost three times as many references in the Synoptic sayings of Jesus [those in the first three gospels] to God’s wrath as there are to his love. . . . But is God angry? . . . True, the word *anger* is used, but only because of the poverty of our language. God’s wrath is not anger in some human, peevish sense, but rather an expression of his justice and love, of his eternal spirit and power. . . . It is his confirmation of humanity’s self-rejection. It is his love in agony.”³

2. Waldo Beach, *The Christian Life* (Richmond: The CLC Press, 1966), pp. 83–84.

3. J. Arthur Baird, *Rediscovering the Power of the Gospel* (Philadelphia, Hampshire Books, 1989), p. 53.

In Reynolds Price's novel *Blue Calhoun*, the protagonist describes how he felt the night when, in an agony of remorse, he confessed to his wife that he had been committing adultery with a younger woman. "I lay there sober that July night and thought as best I could through what I knew my soul really *meant*. And once I knew, again I said 'I'm sorry as I can be—that's all.' I'd seen deep grades of hell in my time—bleeding full-tilt hell with teeth—but recalling that night and those last seconds before I slept, I know and can tell you here tonight that nothing—human, beast, or steel—ever did me a crime to match my words to Myra there in the normal night. I lived to learn that similar words are common as flies—from men to women, women to men, worst of all to millions of children—but most of my waking days here and now are spent to pay small bits of my debt."⁴

Not everyone believes that sin brings punishment, in part because not everyone believes that there is such a thing as sin. Behavior, some argue, with some degree of truth, should be understood, not punished. Here is how agnostic criminal lawyer Clarence Darrow expressed a view in sharp contrast to Hosea's, in an address to prisoners in the Chicago County jail. "I really do not in the least believe in crime. There is no such thing as a crime as the word is generally understood. I do not believe there is any sort of distinction between the real moral condition of the people in and out of jail. One is just as good as the other. The people here can no more help being here than the people outside can avoid being outside. I do not believe that people are in jail because they deserve to be. They are in jail simply because they cannot avoid it on account of circumstances which are entirely beyond their control and for which they are in no way responsible. . . . We all do the best we can under the circumstances."⁵

"Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me. . . . As you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt. 25:41–46, from a parable of Jesus).

Looking Ahead

Hosea believed that God punishes as a father punishes a child. But he did not believe that judgment is God's last word. Read Hos. 11:1–11.

4. Reynolds Price, *Blue Calhoun* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), p. 107.

5. *Philosophy and Contemporary Issues*, John R. Burr and Milton Goldinger, eds. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, Fifth Edition, 1988), pp. 58–59.

session

SIX

Father Love: OURS AND GOD'S

Hos. 11:1–11

Fatherhood: Caring and Risking (11:1–7)

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

According to commentator James Luther Mays, in Hos. 11 “the portrayal of Yahweh [the Lord] as a father caring for a son achieves an explicit tenderness and detail unmatched in the Old Testament. . . . As the story unfolds, the history of Israel becomes an astonishing witness to the very life of Yahweh himself.”¹

In this chapter Hosea becomes a spiritual ancestor of Jesus, whose favorite name for God was “Father.”

There is a danger about calling God “Father.” We must not forget that the Bible speaks of God also as a mother. “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you,” God says in Isa. 66:13. Indeed, a Korean theologian describes how she had to rid herself of the image of God as a Caucasian man with blue eyes and a large nose. She knew, of course, that God is Spirit and that no image, male or female, will do; still it helped her to a new sense of intimacy with God when she began to pray thinking of God as like her loving Korean mother.² The loving parent of Hos. 11 could be thought of as Mother quite as well as Father.

Hosea, however, was a father, and it is out of that experience that his words speak to us men who are fathers. He had two sons and a daughter. Abandoned by his wife, he had known the joys and difficulties of a single parent. At the beginning of the book he used his experience as the still loving husband of an unfaithful wife to describe God’s steadfast love for Israel. Now he uses his experience as a loving parent to describe God’s risk-taking care for Israel. You may be able to recall that kind of care, too, and see how it reminds us of God.

He had taught his little girl to walk and had picked her up when she fell (11:3). He had bandaged his boys’ cuts and salved their bruises (11:3). He had guided them, not with chains but with human kindness and “bands of love” (11:4). He had picked up his daughter and hugged her to his cheek, and he had bent down to give his little boys things they especially liked to eat (11:4). And Hosea says that these actions are a picture of God with God’s children.

But Hosea had seen his children grow up. Parental love involves risk, possible heartbreak, for sooner or later our children must be on their own. They make their own decisions, including wrong decisions. Hosea pictures our Father God crying, “The more I called them, the more they went from me” (11:2). In the days of Moses, God had rescued Israel from Egypt and captivity and cared for them in the wilderness. Now, Hosea knows, “They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king.” They are headed for captivity once again. Why? “Because they have refused to return to me” (11:5). Now grown, they have turned instead to “the Most High,” apparently here used as a title for Baal (11:7).

If you have ever been the father of an adolescent who has turned from you and what you have tried to teach—or been a son who turned away yourself—you can understand what Hosea is saying about us and about God.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

In Hos. 11:1–11, how many ways can you find Hosea picturing the Lord as caring for God’s children?

God has not literally hugged us or taught us to walk. In what ways has God been like a father to us?

Recall the best father you can tell the group about. What things did he do that made him a kind of symbol for God?

1. James Luther Mays, *Hosea* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 151.

2. Hyung Kyung Chung, in *Questions of Faith*, Dolly K. Patterson, ed. (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), p. 84.

Why did not God, the all-powerful Parent, simply stop the children of Israel from turning away? Why did not God force them to answer when God called?

How is that like the risks that any good parent has to take?



THE FATHER WHO NEVER GIVES UP HOPE (HOS. 11:8–11)

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

“How can I give you up?” God cries in agony (11:8). Yes, God will not force these “children” to return. But God loves them just the same. “How can I make you like Admah . . . [and] Zeboiim [cities destroyed by catastrophe centuries before]?” (11:8). However much they may deserve it, God will not allow such destruction to be the last word. Instead, “My compassion grows warm and tender” (11:8).

And so the heavenly Father resolves, “I will not execute my fierce anger” (11:9). (Remember the definition of God’s “wrath” or “anger”: “God’s justice in agony.”) Tempted though God might be to give up on these ungrateful “children,” God never gives up. A human father might despair. But “I am God and no mortal” (11:9). God is determined, without destroying these “children” or denying them their free will, to bring them back again. And Hosea is sure that some day God will succeed!

How will God bring them back? Simply by continuing to call. But what a call is God’s! God “roars like a lion” (11:10). Some day “his children shall come trembling,” responding to that call in faith (11:11). The exiles will be set free. “And I will return them to their homes, says the Lord” (11:11). God’s love will triumph in the end.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Some of us have been taught the God of the philosopher Aristotle, God as the completely rational “Unmoved Mover.” What words or phrases can you find in these verses that show that the biblical God is, by contrast, a God of passion?

Why, in the light of this whole chapter, does God not give up on Israel?

Can you tell the group about a father or mother who refused to give up on a child and whose hope was finally rewarded?

How is that story like the gospel of Hosea and of Jesus?

Can you tell of some things you or your father have done to bring a child closer to God?

What do you think: Has God given up on us?

Afterword

Dr. Spencer Johnson tells of his experience as a single parent. He saw his children staying away from home longer and longer and having discipline problems. A wise physician friend gave him this advice. "Say very clearly what your child has *done*. . . . 'You have come home very late! You did not tell me where you were going! This is the second time this week!' Next, tell your child in no uncertain terms how you *feel* about what he or she has done. 'I AM ANGRY. I AM VERY ANGRY!' If you are angry, express anger *angrily*. . . . You have emotionally told your child the truth. . . . Now take a deep breath and calm down. When you are ready, look at and *touch* your child in a way that lets him know you are on his side. Then . . . quietly tell your child the *rest* of the truth. It is what he wants and needs to hear most from you right now: that he is a good person and that you love him."³

"The movement of this chapter as a whole [Hos. 11] suggests comparison with the parable of the Prodigal Son or, as Helmut Thielicke has named it, the Waiting Father. That father knew the risks of parenting, as he allowed his son to take what he had coming to him and set off on his own. He must have known the pain of parenting as well; we can imagine him hearing reports about his son who was squandering his inheritance and wasting his time and money with prostitutes (Luke 15). But that father's love would not let the rebelling son go. When he saw him in the distance one day, he ran down the road to meet him, embraced him, and threw a homecoming party. So it is with God, says the parable, when God's rebelling children come home."⁴

According to a survey of members of mainline churches, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Two-thirds of families rarely or never have family devotions. More than half the teenagers don't talk to their fathers about faith or God. A third don't talk to their mothers. Two-thirds of families don't do family projects to help others. . . . Another notable finding concerns differences regarding mothers and fathers. While 62 percent of teenagers say they talk to their mothers about religious faith, only about 40 percent say they talk to their fathers. . . . When asked how religious their parents were, 42 percent said their mothers were 'very religious.' Only 33 percent chose this response for their fathers. In addition, 73 percent said their mother was one of the top five positive influences on their faith. . . . [Only] fifty-three percent listed their father among the top five influences."⁵

We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba, Father. . . .
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel
from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.⁶

3. Spencer Johnson, M. D., *The One Minute Father* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1983), pp. 20, 22.

4. James Limburg, *Hosea—Micah* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 42.

5. Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), pp. 170, 172.

6. *A Brief Statement of Faith—Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, lines 27–28, 41–51.

session *seven*

In the End: HOPE FROM THE GOD OF MERCY Hos. 14

When All Else Fails: A Plea and a Prayer (Hos. 14:1–3)

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

In 721 B.C., all of Hosea’s warnings came true. Later, the cruel emperor of Assyria (modern Iraq) boasted about his conquest with carvings and inscriptions that have lasted for twenty-seven centuries: “The governor of Samaria . . . had consorted with the king who opposed me not to do service and not to bring tribute. . . . I clashed with them in the power of the great gods, my lords, and counted as spoil 27,280 people together with their chariots . . . and the gods in whom they trusted.”¹ He impressed some Israelites into his army. The rest of those 27,280 Israelite men, women, and children he kidnapped to Assyria as slaves. They never returned.

Here is how the prophet predicted that horror. “Samaria shall bear her guilt, because she has rebelled against her God; they shall fall by the sword, their little ones shall be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open” (Hos. 13:16). Second Kings 17 is the biblical record of how Hosea’s worst fears came true.

In spite of all his warnings and his fears that it was too late, Hosea seems to have kept on pleading and hoping until the end. Whether he starved to death in the three-year siege of Samaria, died fighting to defend the city, or was carried off as a slave to Assyria, we will never know. But Hosea’s last chapter (14), a song sung in those last fearful days before the fall, is a poem of faith. It pleads with Israel to pray a prayer of repentance. Still, beyond their sad history, it promises in beautiful poetry a coming day when God’s people will flourish like a garden in the shade of the Lord.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

What is the first thing Israel must do in this crisis (14:1–3)? _____

Why, according to Hosea, are God’s people in such trouble? (14:1)

Now Hosea proposes a prayer, carefully telling them what words to use. Earlier Hosea had described Israel as voicing a kind of cheery liturgy that the prophet said was completely useless. What difference can you see between those words, Hos. 6:1–3, and the prayer Hosea says they should pray, 14:2–3?

According to this prayer, what promises must God’s people make?

What sins must they confess?

1. From the Nimrud Prism, as found in *Documents from Old Testament Times*, D. Winton Thomas, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1958), p. 60.

This is a prayer that a faraway seer proposed in a faraway country twenty-seven centuries ago. We face a very different crisis. In what ways, if any, does it seem to you that this prayer might be a good guide for us today?

According to the last line of 14:3, what is the one basis on which we might hope that our prayers might be answered?

Incidentally, the Hebrew word translated “mercy,” racham, comes from the word for a mother’s womb. How do you feel about thinking of God as our Heavenly Mother?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Hosea knew quite well the destruction that was at hand. How in the world—or beyond it—do you suppose he could in that situation voice such a song of hope as 14:4–8?

The prophets were inspired poets. What figures of speech can you find in these verses to describe God?

What figures of speech can you find for the restored people of God?

How would you have felt if, facing death from Assyrian swords, you had heard Hosea’s promise that some day God’s people would be like a beautiful garden, flourishing in the shade of the Lord?

What can you tell about that has given you hope in difficult times?

Not all the prophets’ words came literally true. But perhaps God kept those promises in an even better way. What truth do you find in Paul’s summary: “For in him [Christ] every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes’ ” (2 Cor. 1:20)?



OF HEALING AND HOPE (HOS. 14:4–8)

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

The prophets were not always literally accurate in their predictions. The grand temple of which Ezekiel dreamed (Ezek. 40–43) was never built. The Arabian desert never blossomed nor was a highway built across it for the returning Jews, in spite of the prophecies of Isa. 35:1 and 40:3–4. And in spite of Hosea’s hope, Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was never restored. If they ever did repent, it was too late.

The prophets did sometimes make specific predictions that turned out to be miraculously accurate. But the big thing the prophets knew was the nature of God—that God controls the future, that God is a God of healing. And in that faith Hosea could hope.

Some Discussion Questions for Reviewing Hosea (Hos. 14:9)

The commentaries say that the last verse of Hosea (14:9) is probably an addition by a later scribe, perhaps the one who collected Hosea's prophecies and put them in the form we have them. That verse is written in the style not of Hosea but of the Wisdom Literature, such as the book of Proverbs or the first psalm. Probably from the Southern Kingdom, Judah, this editor saw, as do we, that Hosea's message applied in a later time too. Looking back over the book, as a wise teacher he wanted to make sure that when we read Hosea's words we would take pains to do two things: understand them and live by them. So take a little time to think back over these seven sessions on Hosea.

What would you say are two of the main ideas of this prophet?

What passage is your favorite? _____ Why?

What is the best idea you have gotten from this study?

What do you think Hosea would say to us today?

What would it mean to walk in the light of this book?

Afterword

"Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. In your mercy forgive what we have been, help us amend what we are, and direct what we shall be, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name."²

2. A Prayer of Confession, from the *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 53.

"Christian faith is very realistic about the human situation. It knows both the fragility of life and the limits of life. It is futile to vest one's final hopes in wealth . . . houses . . . empires and armies . . . or even in the Temple. . . . [Yet] the Bible, over against the realism with which it accepts the consequences of human sin and the limitations of created existence, is always a book of hope. Within the Bible there are reasons for despair, if the life of Jeremiah and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, or the foibles of the New Testament church are isolated from the biblical context. Yet through the Bible from the assertion of Genesis that God looked at the world and found it to be very good to the great vision of the new heaven and the new earth with which Scripture concludes there is this solid base of hope."³

"In the image of the resurrection of the body, life and death can be brought into harmony in such a way that death doesn't have to be repressed either. In this Spirit of the resurrection I can here and now wholly live, wholly love and wholly die, for I know with certainty that I shall wholly rise again. In this hope I can love all created things, for I know that none of them will be lost."⁴

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.' And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new. . . . I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end' " (Rev. 21:1-6).

"We strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, 'Come, Lord Jesus!'"⁵

3. John H. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 287-288.

4. Jurgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 87.

5. *A Brief Statement of Faith—Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, lines 73-76.

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