

Covenant-Breakers ~ Hosea 4:1-14

God's Lawsuit Against Israel

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Introduction

Those who lack discernment will come to ruin. That is the theme of Hosea 4. Today's passage offers a warning and a call to repentance to the people of Israel. What's more, in the oracle of the LORD, the consequences of folly and a lack of understanding is laid out plain for all to see (who have eyes to see). This is a fractal truth in that it is verifiable in each individual, in each family, within the Church universal, of each nation, and of the world as a whole.

A Charge against the Children of Israel

Hosea 4:1-2 NET

1 Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites! For the LORD has a covenant lawsuit against the people of Israel. For there is neither faithfulness nor loyalty in the land, nor do they acknowledge God.

2 There is only cursing, lying, murder, stealing, and adultery. They resort to violence and bloodshed.

I appreciate the New English Translation in this passage because it frames the idea of the LORD's contention more closely to the original Hebrew. This is no mere "I don't like how you've been behaving," but rather a formal declaration that the children of Israel have broken the covenant contract with the LORD¹.

This covenant lawsuit is referring to the Mosaic covenant as laid down in the Ten Commandments and the laws of Deuteronomy. That covenant spelled out blessings for faithfulness on the part of the Hebrews and curses for disobedience. The most commonly quoted verse reflecting this covenant is 2 Chronicles 7:14 (ESV):

...[I]f my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

A Note on the Mosaic Covenant

It is important, before we go further, to understand that *we* are not under the Mosaic covenant², but under God's original and eternal covenant with Abraham.

Galatians 3:16-18 ESV - "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise."

The Mosaic covenant—the Law—was fulfilled in Christ's death on the cross.

Romans 8:1-4 - There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh

and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

No longer to we have to bend in fear of the LORD's curse because of our faithlessness³. His grace has been forevermore poured out. The Law and its harsh punishments and condemnation is dead⁴.

Discipline and Punishment

However, the LORD does not change. His heart for holiness amongst his people—his bride—has never changed and never will. So even though we are not subject to physical, punitive punishment because of our transgressions (we are under grace), we must remember that the Lord disciplines those whom he loves⁵.

Discipline and punishment are not the same. Many parents, to their children's great misfortune, have failed to understand the difference. No doubt many of you carry the old wounds of this failure in your own souls. The way I see it is simple and Biblical: **discipline is the patient cultivation of a person, punishment is the wrathful destruction of a person.** God's love and forbearance to us as sons and daughters manifest solely in the realm of discipline and care.

If you find yourself in fear of God's wrath—expecting a smiting lightning bolt at any moment—you have not fully accepted the grace God poured out through Jesus on the cross. "There is no condemnation for those found in Christ Jesus." Throw yourself at him; let him catch you and hold you. He promises to never let go.

Judgement on the Land

Hosea 4:3

Therefore the land will mourn, and all its inhabitants will perish. The wild animals, the birds of the sky, and even the fish in the sea will perish.

It is tempting, in our troubled times, to assume that the LORD is pouring out his wrath upon us. But what the oracle of the LORD is describing here is in fact the natural consequences of their sinful behavior. In the same way, we can look around at our society and see the great reaping of what was sown. What has followed was plain for all to see—it is not the manifestation of God's holy wrath but the logical outcome of our self-centered lifestyle.

"Sin brings its own punishment. The very objects which excite it form a rod for its chastisement. God is perpetually reminding men that pursuit of worldly good is attended with great anxiety and exhausting toil—that its possession is often a mortification and its loss an anguish—that it is dangerous and destructive, leading men "into temptation and a snare, and piercing them through with many sorrows."⁶

It could be said this generation's willfulness allowed the pandemic to spread:

Our fierce refusal to let go of "our God-given rights" has caused more people to fall ill and die than ought to have. Our obsession with sating the thirst for travel and adventure and self-realization spread the disease across the world. Our trust in our nest-eggs and our 401-K's instead of our trust in the LORD has made us vulnerable. Our unflappable faith in the monolith of capitalism is shattering before our eyes.

But we have an opportunity now; an opportunity to repent of our love of this dying world and

return to a simple, childlike love of Jesus. We can no longer seek solace in the comfort of friendships and family and business. Let us seek our solace in our savior's arms.

Guiltiest in God's Eyes

Hosea 4:4-5

4 Do not let anyone accuse or contend against anyone else: for my case is against you priests!
5 You stumble day and night, and the false prophets stumble with you; You have destroyed your own people!

In ancient Israel, the priest were the judges of any and all legal conflicts amongst the people⁷. The oracle of the LORD has layed the blame of all that was happening and would happen to the children of Israel squarely on the priests. He's saying here: "you have no right to settle disputes and lawsuits, for my lawsuit is with you, unrighteous priests!"

The theme of God's specific displeasure with unfaithful priests and leaders is throughout the Bible. From God's condemnation of the "evil shepherds" in Ezekiel 34 and Zechariah 11 to the constant rebukes of Jesus towards the Pharisees. We, too, are warned again and again, of the weight of misusing, misrepresenting, or twisting the Gospel. Consider:

Matthew 7:15-20 - "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits."

James 3:1 - Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Acts 20:28-30 - Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

Luke 17:1-2 - And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.

The priests brought misery and curse upon the land. We should take sober stock of this fact as we, the saints, are the holy priesthood of God⁸.

Evil Shepherds

Hosea 4:6

You have destroyed my people by failing to acknowledge me! Because you refuse to acknowledge me, I will reject you as my priests. Because you reject the law of your God, I will reject your descendants.

Because of they're willful waywardness—their hypocrisy and spiritual whoredom—the LORD rejected them as his priests. The LORD is holy and cannot be party to the evil of men. As was forewarned by YHWH through Moses in Deuteronomy 29, they would be subjected to his curse if

they failed to remember him and keep his covenant. God was making good on his promise.

They did not give the LORD credit and worship for his good favor. They fooled themselves into believing that their own works had made them prosperous and powerful. God was correcting them.

They rejected the law, turning first to “alternate interpretations” before resorting to full-fledged rejection and disobedience. Sound familiar? It should, for we as the body of Christ have done so, allowing a little slide here and there until the “gospel” is completely truth-free and all manner of unholiness is allowed to profane the Church. God was rejecting their progeny because they were not righteous.

Shameful in the Sight of the LORD

Hosea 4:7-8

7 The more the priests increased in numbers, the more they rebelled against me. They have turned their glorious calling into a shameful disgrace!

8 They feed on the sin offerings of my people; their appetites long for their iniquity!

“The increase may refer to number, or wealth, power, and dignity. Israel had grown into a strong and powerful nation, but increase of greatness was attended with increase of sin. Its prosperity was attributed to idols (Hos 2:7), thought to be the fruit of their worship, and strengthened them in their delusion. God would therefore turn their glory into shame and make them a warning to others.”⁹

The appetites of the flesh and pride of self, how innocuous and yet how destructive to our soul. Have you ever considered that “feeding” is? In a literal sense, it is the giving of sustenance—calories, vital minerals and vitamins—to allow life to not just subsist but to *grow*. Whatever you feed grows.

The same is true of our little pet appetites. Feed your thirst for alcohol, and that tiny little companion becomes an insatiable monster. Feed your lust, your pride, your anger, your self-hatred, your love of money, your love of gossip—whatever the sin, it soon becomes the master and you the pet.

I saw coming towards us a [man] who carried something on his shoulder....a little red lizard, and it was twitching its tail like a whip and whispering things in his ear. As we caught sight of him he turned his head to the reptile with a snarl of impatience. ‘Shut up, I tell you!’ he said. It wagged its tail and continued to whisper to him. He ceased snarling, and presently began to smile. Then he turned and started to limp westward, away from the mountains.

‘Off so soon?’ said a[n angel]....

...‘Yes. I’m off,’ said the Ghost. ‘Thanks for your hospitality. But it’s no good, you see. I told this little chap’ (here he indicated the Lizard) ‘that he’d have to be quiet if he came – which he insisted on doing. Of course his stuff won’t do here: I realize that. But he won’t stop. I shall just have to go home.’

‘Would you like me to make him quiet?’ said the flaming Spirit – an angel, as I now understood.

‘Of course I would,’ said the Ghost.

‘Then I will kill him,’ said the Angel, taking a step forward...

‘...Honestly, I don’t think there’s the slightest necessity for that. I’m sure I shall be able to keep it in order now. I think the gradual process would be far better than killing it.’

‘The gradual process is of no use at all.’...

...‘Why, you’re hurting me now.’

‘I never said it wouldn’t hurt you. I said it wouldn’t kill you....I cannot kill it against your will. It is impossible. Have I your permission?’ The Angel’s hands were almost closed on the Lizard, but not quite. Then the

Lizard began chattering to the [man] so loud that even I could hear what it was saying. ‘Be careful,’ it said. ‘He can do what he says. He can kill me. One fatal word from you and he will! Then you’ll be without me for ever and ever. It’s not natural. How could you live? You’d be only a sort of ghost, not a real man as you are now. He doesn’t understand. He’s only a cold, bloodless abstract thing. It may be natural for him, but it isn’t for us. Yes, yes. I know there are no real pleasures now, only dreams. But aren’t they better than nothing? And I’ll be so good. I admit I’ve sometimes gone too far in the past, but I promise I won’t do it again. I’ll give you nothing but really nice dreams – all sweet and fresh and almost innocent. You might say, quite innocent...’

‘Have I your permission?’ said the Angel to the Ghost.

‘I know it will kill me.’

‘It won’t. But supposing it did?’

‘You’re right. It would be better to be dead than to live with this creature.’¹⁰

The holy priesthood of God had turned their affections to the world—to the desires of the flesh and pride of life—and the whole of God’s people suffered for it.

None are Innocent of Whoredom

Hosea 4:9-10

9 I will deal with the people and priests together: I will punish them both for their ways, and I will repay them for their deeds.

10 They will eat, but not be satisfied; they will engage in prostitution, but not increase in numbers; because they have abandoned the LORD by pursuing other gods.

However evil the shepherds of Israel were, all who turned away from the truth, beauty, and goodness of God were guilty of the same covenant lawsuit. They had all broken their vows and would pay the cost. It is so easy for us to point the blame for our behavior towards others. We see our character defects as the result of others’ action, and we refuse to take responsibility—just like Eve did in blaming the serpent and Adam with blaming Eve¹¹.

Indeed, there is much to be said of the scars of like leading us to certain sins. But we must never make the mistake of forgiving ourselves because it was too hard to act otherwise. After all, “I am who my parents made me”, and “everyone else was doing it,” and “I deserve it,” and “just this once,” are not sufficient excuses for the spiritual whoring we each, by our human natures, are guilty of.

Instead of justifying our behavior, let us repent.

Lust and Pleasures Blind Us

Hosea 4:11

Old and new wine take away the understanding of my people.

Lust for the pleasures of life, whether in the intoxication of fermented wine or the obsession with

sweet delicacies, takes away discernment and understanding. It is as John warns in his first epistle:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. — 1 John 2:15-16 (ESV)

The funny thing about consuming—whether consuming the news or video games or entertainment or drugs or alcohol—is that the consumption is a two-way street. The more you consume, the more it consumes you.

But the same is true of God's word! The more you consume his light and his goodness and his truth every day, the more he consumes your mind, body and soul. What do you consume? Does it bring you wisdom and understanding or does it dim the light of your soul?

Spiritual Adultery

Hosea 4:12-13

12 They consult their wooden idols, and their diviner's staff answers with an oracle. The wind of prostitution blows them astray; they commit spiritual adultery against their God.

13 They sacrifice on the mountaintops, and burn offerings on the hills; they sacrifice under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is so pleasant. As a result, your daughters have become cult prostitutes, and your daughters-in-law commit adultery!

The children of Israel, abandoned by their shepherds and turned away from the LORD, sought out comfort and meaning from other gods. This is the way of human nature—to look around at that which is close to hand instead of up to God.

Here in Sedona, the Mecca of the New Age and the Esoteric, we see this daily. People seek solace in creation rather than the creation. People see the beauty and majesty and danger of nature and never stop to wonder at what it says about God.

My Case is Against You, not Them

Hosea 4:14a

I will not punish your daughters when they commit prostitution, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery. For the men consort with harlots, they sacrifice with temple prostitutes.

Do you find this shocking? Perhaps this is scandalous to our modern, Christian ears, but it shouldn't be. God judges the unseen heart while we judge seen actions of others. Paul warns us in Romans chapter 2 not to pass judgement on those in our society who live lives of sin, for by doing so we presume upon his grace towards us!

Would it be shocking to you if God held his judgement for those who celebrated abortion rather than the broken woman that seeks one out? Would it shock you if God's wrath was towards the consumers of pornography rather than the pornstar?

We vilify those caught in sin, never understanding that God's amazing grace is for the captive and the broken. He calls out to the heart of sinners, and the unrighteous hear his call while the self-righteous cannot. They are deaf to it, seeing in themselves no reason to repent and, therefore, no

reason for grace.

Where were the fathers?

It is a fact that your children will seek your approval by pursuing the things you demonstrated important to you. Children will pursue careers and hobbies and families they, perhaps subconsciously, think will earn them approval and praise from their fathers.

No small wonder then, that their daughters would turn to prostitution in the temples of the gods their fathers “worshipped.” God does not hold the daughters accountable for judgement, for they had no spiritual leadership¹². Or rather, they had spiritually twisted leadership.

God is long-suffering, but there comes a time when no amount of mercy or kindness will turn a stiff-necked people, and he must relinquish his blessings. We each have a choice to humble ourselves, or be humbled¹³.

Folly and Ruin

Hosea 4:14b

It is true: "A people that lacks understanding will come to ruin!"

Remember that consuming is a two-way street. Does what you consume bring you closer to the truth, beauty and goodness of God, or does it leave your soul more darkened and drained and shriveled than before. If the latter, repent beloved! Repent, and return to the nourishment of the LORD.

Jeremiah 17:5-10 (NET1)

5 The LORD says, “I will put a curse on people who trust in mere human beings, who depend on mere flesh and blood for their strength, and whose hearts have turned away from the LORD.”

6 They will be like a shrub in the desert. They will not experience good things even when they happen. It will be as though they were growing in the desert, in a salt land where no one can live.

7 My blessing is on those people who trust in me, who put their confidence in me.

8 They will be like a tree planted near a stream whose roots spread out toward the water. It has nothing to fear when the heat comes. Its leaves are always green. It has no need to be concerned in a year of drought. It does not stop bearing fruit.

9 The human mind is more deceitful than anything else. It is incurably bad. Who can understand it?

10 I, the LORD, probe into people’s minds. I examine people’s hearts. I deal with each person according to how he has behaved. I give them what they deserve based on what they have done.

Conclusion

“...[Hosea] has begun to do what no other Old Testament book does quite so vividly: to speak of God and His people not primarily in terms of master and servant, or king and subjects (indispensable as these categories are), but as man and wife, with all that this implies of personal delight and potential hurt.

This approach is far from sentimental. It sharpens guilt immeasurably by making it the betrayal of

love; it shows us the true motive of God's persistence, so easily thought to be mere doggedness; and it deepens our understanding of repentance and renewal, for sins against love damage the very roots of a relationship, and are not healed by brisk apologies and hasty resolutions.¹⁴"

It is inexpressibly important that we understand something about God's forbearance (his long-suffering patience). It is so easy for us, when thinking about God's wrath, to conjure up an image of Zeus throwing lightning bolts with reckless abandon, but that is not the right analogy.

God's mercy and patience are made manifest in his holding back the full natural consequences of our misdeeds—as an individual, as a nation, as a race—and his wrath is a reluctant allowance of those consequences to proceed.

The children of Israel had abandoned their God. They had left their husband and gone a'whoring. They chose to sell themselves for the promises of the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the sweet pride of life.

A Tale of Two Trees

If every man's life were a tree, there are two guaranteed fates. The first is to lean on our own strength of will and determination in the salt flats of life, leading ultimately to ruin. The second is to grow beside the LORD, drinking in his spirit every day. The difference between these two trees has nothing to do with effort or luck or a stronger or weaker desire to live and thrive; the only difference is that one consumes the living Word every day and the other consumes everything but.

Which are you? In this current global crisis with all the disruptions to our lives and schedules, I believe the truth of the matter has been laid bare for each of us to discern. Are you constantly "just holding it together," overwhelmed by everything? Or are you at peace in the midst of your struggles?

It has nothing to do with personal effort or desire to be at peace. It has everything to do with where you turn to when the stress and duress come. Will you repent and turn to the LORD? Your heavenly husband is waiting with open arms to take you back. Run to him.

Questions:

1. What does it mean that the LORD contends with his people?
2. What covenant were the Israelites guilty of breaking?
3. Are we under that same covenant?
4. What were the consequences of their disobedience?
5. Who was guiltiest in God's eyes? Why?
6. What are "shameful disgraces" in the LORD's eyes?
7. How did the people lose their wisdom & understanding?
8. Who is God's punishment not directed towards?
9. What does this tell us about the LORD?
10. What happens to those who walk away from knowledge of the LORD?

¹ The term in Hosea refers to a covenant lawsuit in which Yahweh the suzerain lodges a legal case against his disobedient vassal, accusing Israel and Judah of breach of covenant which will elicit the covenant curses. **NET Bible (2tn)**

² See Deuteronomy 29 and 30

³ As in Deuteronomy 28:15-19

⁴ See Romans 8:1-2

⁵ **Hebrews 12:7-10 ESV** - It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.

⁶ Preacher's Complete Homiletical Commentary on the New Testament: Volume 25: The Minor Prophets.

⁷ **Deuteronomy 17:9-11** - And you shall come to the Levitical priests and to the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall consult them, and they shall declare to you the decision. Then you shall do according to what they declare to you from that place that the LORD will choose. And you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you. According to the instructions that they give you, and according to the decision which they pronounce to you, you shall do. You shall not turn aside from the verdict that they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left.

⁸ **1 Peter 2:9** - But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

⁹ Preacher's Complete Homiletical Commentary on the New Testament: Volume 25: The Minor Prophets.

¹⁰ Excerpts from C.S. Lewis, The Great Divorce

¹¹ See Genesis 3:12-13

¹² "Hosea takes an unexpected line on this, for instead of castigating the juvenile prostitutes ('your daughters') and the roving brides, he asks who has set them this example. The answer is the men—the very fathers and husbands who felt themselves betrayed." The Bible Speaks Today - The Message of Hosea: Love to the Loveless.

¹³ **Matthew 23:12 (ESV)**

"Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

¹⁴ Derek Kidner, The Bible Speaks Today - The Message of Hosea: Love to the Loveless.