

## A PRODIGAL PEOPLE

### HOSEA 4:15-5:7

PROSTITUTES IN A FAR COUNTRY — LUKE THORNE — 7.26.20

#### INTRODUCTION

Today's passage is a deep dive into the specific judgments of God towards Israel (or Ephraim). It is a specific breakdown of the pronouncements of divine judgment found in Hosea chapter 2:6-13 for the sins of Israel's rulers, priests, and people.

When studying a book of prophesy in the Bible, it can be confusing to read passages of judgment followed immediately by passages of redemption and love, only to be followed by even more specific and severe judgments and then more redemption. This is due, in no small part, to our western linear mindset. When we, pupils of western culture, wish to make a point or tell a story, we start at A and work our way to B, then on to C, etc.

The Jewish mindset is not so. In an Eastern school of thought, the way to make a point is to talk *around* the subject. If you're point is to demonstrate God's irresistibly redeeming love, you don't say *that*. Instead, you talk about the people's evil nature, you talk about God's implacable justice; you spell out, again and again, the necessary consequences with escalating fervor and judgment.

And then you sharply switch to God's promise to restore and protect, his promise to betroth *forever*—without end. You tell of how he can never abandon his wayward children, no matter what. While this seems like anything but straightforward, it allows the reader to explore more deeply the *reasons* why redemption is undeserved, *why* sinful man cannot help but continue on his wayward path, and how *incredible* God's forgiveness really is—It allows us to explore the apparent contradiction between God's righteous justice and his tender mercy.

The Word read through an Eastern eye is not the prescriptive prose of a manual for life but descriptive poetry of a song reveling in the mystery of God's grace for all. And so, let us dive once again into the book of Hosea. Let us look soberly into the mirror it holds up to our lustful nature; let us not hide our face from the unpleasant truth of God's complete holiness and our absolute destitution; let us revel in the mystery of God's overwhelming grace and shout the good news from the rooftops!

#### A WARNING TO ISRAEL

Hosea 4:15-16 (NET)

15 Although you, O Israel, commit adultery, do not let Judah become guilty! Do not journey to Gilgal! Do not go up to Beth Aven! Do not swear, "As surely as the LORD lives!"

16 Israel has rebelled like a stubborn heifer! Soon the LORD will put them out to pasture like a lamb in a broad field!

This is an interesting passage, for it contains a wealth of subtle meaning. At face value, the Oracle of the LORD is warning the northern kingdom to not allow their idolatry to move south into Judah. God says, "don't even go to Gilgal or Beth Aven," which are towns along the border between the two nations.

If we were to stop there in our exegesis, we would surely miss out on the deeper meaning of this warning. Why are Gilgal and Beth Aven mentioned?

#### GILGAL

Gilgal was the place the Israelites camped after finally entering into the promised land<sup>1</sup>. At this location, Joshua erected 12 large stones taken from the Jordan river so that all generations to come would remember that "...the LORD your God dried up the water of the Jordan before you while you crossed over. It was just like

when the LORD your God dried up the Red Sea before us while we crossed it. He has done this so all the nations of the earth might recognize the LORD's power and **so you might always obey the LORD your God**" (Joshua 4:23-24, emphasis added).

Israel had forgotten their God and had ceased to obey him long before. Gilgal, which had been meant as a reminder of God's faithfulness, had become a curse to them. What's more, after all the men had been circumcised at Gilgal that day, the LORD declared, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." And so the name of that place is called Gilgal [which means 'rolled away'] to this day" Joshua 5:9 (ESV).

"like a moth... and like dry rot'—for the silent process of decay is His, no less than the march of armies. Both can be well accounted for in natural terms when a nation goes soft, but both are God's potential scourges, as appropriate as they are deadly. Of the two threats to a people, aggression and corruption, the second is the more ominous, and in these chapters its signs are everywhere. Aggression, for all its terrors, can unite and purge, but corruption only divides and demoralizes.<sup>2</sup>"

### **BETH AVEN**

Beth-aven literally means "House of Evil," and is a purposeful play on words referring to Israel's favorite shrine to God, Bethel (meaning "House of God.") Hosea is literally calling their worship of God evil and imploring them to abandon it. This is not so dissimilar to Amos' encouragement to Idolatry:

**Amos 4:4-5**

4 "Go to Bethel and rebel! At Gilgal rebel some more! Bring your sacrifices in the morning, your tithes on the third day!

5 Burn a thank offering of bread made with yeast! Make a public display of your voluntary offerings! For you love to do this, you Israelites." The sovereign LORD is speaking!

Talk about sarcasm! Where Amos sarcastically commanded them to indulge in their harlotry, Hosea calls their worship of the LORD pure evil. But why? Surely, sinners willing to worship the YHWH are to be encouraged, and not declared whores by doing so?

Unfortunately, their worship of the LORD was formalistic at best. They went through the motions for tradition's sake while their hearts lusted for the pleasures just outside the temple door. Formalism is a danger we, too, should watch out for—in our own spiritual lives as well as in our church.

### **FORMALISM**

- The doctrine that formal structure rather than content is what should be represented
- The practice of scrupulous adherence to prescribed or external forms

"The proneness of the Jews to polytheism is instructive to us. Churches favored with the purest worship, nations enriched with the oracles of God, individuals privileged with means of grace, may fall into formalism, perfect apathy in religion, and undue veneration of the creature. Formalism, corrupt worship, and entire abandonment of God are the steps which lead to idolatry.<sup>3</sup>"

### **A WARNING TO JUDAH**

**Hosea 4:16-17**

16 Israel has rebelled like a stubborn heifer! Soon the LORD will put them out to pasture like a lamb in a broad field!

17 Ephraim has attached himself to idols; Do not go near him!

"Although Israel has been as rebellious as a stubborn heifer, the Lord will indeed gain control of Israel: they will be like lambs (weakened and defeated) when he puts them out to pasture in a broad field (exile).<sup>4</sup>" This is a prophecy that would, in a few short years, come to pass... and the warning to Israel's sister Judah is plain: God

will do likewise to you if you continue to follow in this path.

The broad field is a metaphor for abandonment. The Oracle of the LORD is warning that to continue in this spiritual whoredom is to go where God, their promised husband, cannot follow. Called “tough love” these days, God is revealing something amazing about his affection for us. He will not force himself upon you. He will pursue you, doggedly if necessary, but he will not imprison you in his home. He knows that allowing the sheep to go astray is often the best way for them to learn to stay with the shepherd. When we go out to a distant land pursuing the pleasures we think we want, only then can we see the folly of it.

Consider Solomon. In 1 Kings chapter 3, Solomon, not desiring riches or honor, long life or glory, asks YHWH only for divine wisdom. What is fascinating is God’s response: “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches....I will give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you, all of your days<sup>5</sup>.” And so, a much older Solomon writes:

9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.

10 And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.

11 Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun<sup>6</sup>.

God knew that for Solomon to be truly wise, Solomon had to experience firsthand the emptiness of the joys of this world. “The prodigal must be left to his boon companions (this is the force of RSV’s word ‘joined’, 17) and to his revels and their aftermath. Not till then (and here not till the last line of the chapter) is there any prospect of his coming to himself.”<sup>7</sup> Rebellion must run its course in each of us before we can ever understand what grace truly means.

## WHAT (NOT) TO DO

**Hosea 4:18-19**

18 They consume their alcohol, then engage in cult prostitution; they dearly love their shameful behavior.

19 A whirlwind has wrapped them in its wings; they will be brought to shame because of their idolatrous worship.

It is a trap for us to look at this list of condemnations and think, “wow. They were really evil. Thanks God I am not like that! Licentious drunks given to cult prostitution!? Surely heathens such as these *deserve* God’s wrath.” And, because we are spiritual people who know that God is pleased with our Godliness, we say a prayer of thanksgiving for our faithfulness and love for God.

Thank you, LORD, that I am not one of *them*: sinners, drunkards extortionists, unrighteous, adulterers, pro-choicers, homosexuals. Thank you that I am not as other men, even like this tax collector.<sup>8</sup> Ouch! Isn’t that the prayer of the pharisee?

The fundamental story of the Bible is not, as it might seem in today’s reading, about judgment and punishment for transgressions, but the story of perfect love and overwhelming grace. So often, when reading God’s Word, passages like this call us to confront the depravity of our natures—looking into the mirror of who we are in the light of God’s perfection—and acknowledge our inability to measure up.

The first thing we must understand about grace—long before we can take hold of its promise—is that grace, by its nature, means that it cannot ever be earned and is only for the guilty.

- There is no working for it or putting a down payment on it.
- If we refuse to take responsibility for our actions—blaming our choices on our parents or on other people or even demons—we cannot receive grace.
- Once received, there is no exchanging it for something else. It’s a take-it-or-leave-it kind of deal.

Sometimes, though, it is easy to look at others, seeing their sin and depravity, forgetting that we are *exactly* the same. There is no scale or rubric to which God compares each person's sin, judging it 'too bad,' or only 'kinda bad.'

## **A DECLARATION TO THE THREE**

**Hosea 5:1-2**

- 1 Hear this, you priests! Pay attention, you Israelites! Listen closely, O king! For judgment is about to overtake you!  
For you were like a trap to Mizpah, like a net spread out to catch Tabor.  
2 Those who revolt are knee-deep in slaughter, but I will discipline them all.

In this passage, God's judgment falls, specifically, on 1) the religious leaders, 2) the people themselves, and 3) the ruling elite.

"All ranks are accused: the priests, the rulers, and the people. Though some were enticed by others, that does not render them without excuse. The prophet rebukes all, without respect of persons, and shows how justly God was angry with their sins."<sup>9</sup>

Romans 3:23 tells us, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." No amount of education or dedication, station or stature absolves us of the fact that we are sinners, bereft of faithfulness and goodness. Thank the LORD this is true! All of us, from the politician to the pauper stand in equally dismal standing. And yet, so often we pretend this were not so.

Have you ever come to church with a fake smile on? The morning was an ordeal in which, with every step, you fell further into anger, impatience—perhaps even cruelty. Your spouse or your children (or your parents) drove you "up the wall," and here you are, determined to shine to your peers with modesty and magnanimity. Why? Do you not know that the LORD is not fooled, and either are your brothers and sisters? Instead of hiding your failures, carry them into the light. Bear one another's burdens, confess and be healed. There's no room for masquerades in God's kingdom.

Old Israel failed. Old Israel would never succeed because she was guilty, because she could not do the one thing the LORD desired. She could not love Him. But we have a new Israel—the one promised originally to Abraham—and he succeeded where we could not. Israel means "who prevails upon God." That is the true Israel, and the only man to ever take claim of that title is Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, if you are in Christ, you are in the New Israel! Those amazing promises of Hosea 2:19-20, to be betrothed to the LORD forever—legally and with love, with mercy and affection—are yours!

## **INTIMATELY KNOWN AND FULL OF SHAME**

**Hosea 5:3**

- I know Ephraim all too well; the evil of Israel is not hidden from me. For you have engaged in prostitution, O Ephraim; Israel has defiled itself.

The amazing thing about God's grace is the fact that it is all grace. We cannot lie to God, or hide our true nature from him. All is made manifest before his eyes and there is no hidden agenda, motivation, or deed that escapes his notice. At first glance, this seems a terrible realization. It means that I cannot hide my shameful deeds; they are exposed, and I stand naked, lacking any righteousness to clothe myself in, before a consuming fire<sup>10</sup>.

Have any of you been afflicted with the sudden, invasive memory of your darkest shame as you are about to drift off for the night? I confess that I have. I may have gone years without remembering that dark moment and then, *woosh!*, there I am, reliving all the pain and guilt, as fresh and real as though I were there. God sees us in that moment. In fact, Ephesians 2 tells us *that* moment is the moment he looked down upon you from the cross. That is the moment your sinfulness and ineffectiveness and selfishness was hewn into his living body.

And it was at that moment he whispered into your ear, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”<sup>11</sup> And that, it turns out, is what we mean when we sing of God’s “amazing grace,” and “reckless love.” Amazing grace is not, ‘I made you a bit more like me so that I can tolerate your presence.’ It’s not ‘sure, you can come home, son, but you’re going to have to work off your debt.’

Grace is God throwing his best clothes on my unfit back and putting the family ring on my finger and feasting in celebration no expense spared! Grace’s only answer to the question why is, “because I love you.”

## **A SLAVE TO WHOM YOU OBEY**

**Hosea 5:4**

Their wicked deeds do not allow them to return to their God; because a spirit of idolatry controls their heart, and they do not acknowledge the LORD.

The Spirit of Idolatry, in juxtaposition to the Spirit of God, indwells the impenitent sinner. Because they do not acknowledge God (Romans 1:21), they are given to their sinful desires; and the Spirit of lawlessness rages on within them. We are, all of us, indwelt *voluntarily* to one spirit or another.

We subject ourselves as slaves to that which we obey (Romans 6:16). There is no ‘free man,’ only those who accept unpleasant truth, which leads to freedom and healing, and those who are unaware of their bondage, gallivanting through life as some reverse Don Quixote, convinced that the giants are merely windmills.

As someone who struggled mightily for many years with addiction, I can tell you truly that the first step in recovering from the unrecoverable is admitting that you are powerless and trapped. For me, as long as I believed I had power over the drink, it consumed me. The moment I cried out, unable to even raise my head, healing began.

The same is true of any sin or transgression. Addiction to some substance has the advantage only in that its fruit (and therefore, its cure) are rather obvious. Other forms of sin are far more insidious as they are not externally obvious. It reminds me of the classic novel, *A Picture of Dorian Grey*. In that story, the libertine young Mr. Grey continues to debauch himself without ever a physical sign for years. But while the effects of his lifestyle do not touch his face, his portrait—hidden away—grows ever more hideous and corpse-like. It reveals his *true* self.

This sins of dishonesty and selfishness and pride do not light upon our physical forms. Men and women parade around in angelic beauty with black, rotting hearts pulsing inside.

## **WILDFIRE CONSUMES WITHOUT PREJUDICE**

**Hosea 5:5**

The arrogance of Israel testifies against it; Israel and Ephraim will be overthrown because of their iniquity. Even Judah will be brought down with them.

In our unprecedented times, we can, I believe, agree on one central truth made self-evident by these unprecedented events; the affliction of one people’s transgression falls upon all without prejudice. The ‘innocent’ suffer by the actions of the ‘evil.’ Now we could digress into a discussion of who, really, *is* innocent and who is not, but the important thing to realize is that the transgressions of one cause suffering to everyone around him.

We all understand this at some level, though our inner desire for justice rages against it. When a man is an alcoholic, his family bears the weight of the consequences alongside him. When a pastor falls into adultery, the church bears the weight of the consequences alongside him. When a nation’s leaders declare war, the nation bears the weight of the consequences alongside them. We don’t like it, but we all know it to be true.

In fact, the lie of the spirit of idolatry is that you can partake of your particular vices without any external effect. No one will be hurt by your slight indiscretions; no one will even know. Brothers and sisters, every

transgression is a corporate transgression.

“...The ancient god of individualism whispers that some sins are just between God and me. If there are consequences, they will impact only me. And this is simply not true. The consistent message of the Bible is this: Personal sin yields collateral suffering, without fail.

Consider Achan, who believed he could take the spoils of war for himself and conceal them in his tent (Josh. 7). God’s punishment of not only Achan but his entire household drives home the lesson that personal sin is sin against our neighbor. Communal well-being is harmed by individual rebellion.

We are not so different from Achan. We tell ourselves a similar lie as we bow to the god of individualism: “As long as my selfishness is concealed, as long as I don’t act openly on my impulse to belittle, as long as no one knows I am addicted to this behavior, or this substance, or my own bitterness, no one is harmed but me.” But personal sin yields collateral suffering.

Why? Because what we do in the secret place is the most accurate representation of who we truly are. It reveals the motives of our hearts, the overflow of which invariably splashes onto our neighbor. Personal sin yields collateral suffering. But here is good news: Personal holiness yields collateral blessing.<sup>12</sup>”

Brother, sister, if you are cultivating a secret sin—of the flesh or the mind—do not think that it has no effect on those whom you love. It is made manifest in your demeanor, your faithfulness to God and to others. It cannot be hidden if you are to be in the light. 1 John tells us,

6 If we say we have fellowship with him and yet keep on walking in the darkness, we are lying and not practicing the truth.

7 But if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

8 If we say we do not bear the guilt of sin,[10] we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.

9 But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous, forgiving us our sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness<sup>13</sup>.

## WHO CAN FIND GOD?

**Hosea 5:6-7**

6 Although they bring their flocks and herds to seek the favor of the LORD, they will not find him — he has withdrawn himself from them!

7 They have committed treason against the LORD, because they bore illegitimate children. Soon the new moon festival will devour them and their fields.

Ouch! God had turned his face away from them. His goodness and grace were withheld, unattainable to a people abandoned to the darkness of their hearts. What an abysmal place to be. They were cut off, by their own choice, from the love of the Father. But of course, this isn’t the end of the story. “The very festivals that were relied on to placate God would be the sharpest provocation of Him.<sup>14</sup>”

Like the parable of the prodigal son, they had taken the blessings of their father and gone out to a faraway land to spend it all on the lust of their eyes and the lust of their flesh. Their pride forbade them from returning in any form of contrition or repentance... yet. But as with all who are lost, the distractions of the world fade and grow wearisome. There comes a day in everyone’s life, like the Solomon of Ecclesiastes, where they finally awake to the sobering and absolute worthlessness of their present situation.

They see that even the unclean swine with which they bunk have it better than they survey their spiritual stock, only to find it barren and overdrawn. All the harlotry has made them impoverished and, what’s worse, insurmountably in debt. They are alone; utterly alone.

I have been here, to this desolate end of the line. No doubt many of you have too. With no more horizon left

to continue forward, I found there were only two choices: 1) turn back and walk, step by step, to my Father, 2) or end it all. I must admit, the latter seemed more just and prudent to me at the time, so much so that I can never pronounce judgment upon the suicidal, for I know the dark pain and hopelessness they inhabit. But oh, that I would also shout for them to turn back, before desperation overwhelms, and run to God's open arms.

In that place, you cannot see God, for he is too far away (or so it seems). It feels as though no amount of effort retracing your steps will ever lead you out of this barren shadow of life, but to you I say, "press on, for I have walked it before you, and it is not as far as it feels right now." And if you wonder still, if God will take you in with open arms, I can only say, "surely, I was just as broken as you are now—more so, I fear—but your father has so much more for you than an embrace. That is just the beginning. Run, walk, crawl, only go to him. He is watching for you even now and will not go in until the end of time."

You are not alone. You never have been. Your father is waiting with open arms. He is never as far as it feels, and he will not grow weary of waiting. He cannot grow faint.

### QUESTIONS:

1. What is the significance of Gilgal?
2. What is the significance of Beth-Aven?
3. What is the LORD's warning to Judah (the Southern Kingdom)?
4. What is the danger in discussing the transgressions of others?
5. Who is guilty in God's eyes? Who isn't?
6. How does the fact that the LORD sees and knows *everything* about you make you feel? Why?
7. Do the consequences of my hidden sin affect others? Do I chafe at this idea? Why?
8. Why was God disgusted with their feasts and sacrifices?
9. Why did the LORD turn his face away from the Israelites in their sin?
10. Are there any idols that are keeping me from running back to the Father?

---

<sup>1</sup> See Joshua 4:19-5:9

<sup>2</sup> The Bible Speaks Today - The Message of Hosea: Love to the Loveless.

<sup>3</sup> James Wolfendale, Preacher's Complete Homiletical Commentary on the New Testament: Volume 25: The Minor Prophets, (Austin, Texas: WORDsearch, 2016), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 4".

<sup>4</sup> NET Bible, First ed. (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 1996)

<sup>5</sup> 1 Kings 3:11,13 (ESV)

<sup>6</sup> Ecclesiastes 2:9-11 (ESV)

<sup>7</sup> Derek Kidner, The Message of Hosea: Love to the Loveless, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1984), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 52.

<sup>8</sup> See Luke 18:10-14

<sup>9</sup> James Wolfendale, Preacher's Complete Homiletical Commentary on the New Testament: Volume 25: The Minor Prophets, (Austin, Texas: WORDsearch, 2016), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 5".

<sup>10</sup> See Hebrews 12

<sup>11</sup> See Isaiah 43

<sup>12</sup> Wilkin, J, *Christianity Today*, "In Community, No Sin Is Individual" July/August 2020, Vol. 64, No. 5, Pg. 31,

<sup>13</sup> 1 John 1:6-9 (NET)

<sup>14</sup> The Bible Speaks Today - The Message of Hosea: Love to the Loveless.