

No Knowledge of God

Hosea: Learning to Love Again

Hosea 4-5

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September 30, 2018

Last week we began our study in the book of Hosea. Hosea deals with the relationship between Israel and God. It uses the metaphor of family to drive home the heart of the relationship between God and his people. The prophet Hosea was commanded to marry a wayward woman to illustrate the way Israel goes after other gods instead of staying faithful to the one true God. There's nothing more heart-breaking than betrayal in a marriage. It's devastating.

But Hosea not only uses marriage to illustrate the relationship between God and his people. He also uses the metaphor of the relationship between a father and his children. This is equally as powerful. Some of you here know what it's like to have wayward children. You've experienced broken relationships with your adult children. Or you've seen your children walk away from the Lord. That's very painful.

Hosea and Gomer had three children. Their first child was called Jezreel, which speaks of the conflict or bloodshed in Israel. Their second child was named No Mercy. And their third child was named Not My People. These names illustrate the broken relationship between God and his people.

One of the main commentaries our preaching team is using says our passage this morning refers to these three children. Hosea 1-3 listed the three children. Chapters 4-5 demonstrate why the children of God were called Jezreel, No Mercy, and Not My People; why God had a broken relationship with his children, Israel.

To divide our time this morning, I'm going to go to deal with the three children in three parts. We'll read the sections that deal with these three children as we go along. And they'll teach us why they were in conflict with one another, why God said they weren't his people, and why he would have no mercy on them.

JEZREEL (4:1-3)

Let's begin with the first child, Jezreel, in chapter 4, verses 1-3.

Hosea 4:1-3¹

^{4:1}*Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel,
for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or steadfast love,
and no knowledge of God in the land;
²there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery;
they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.
³Therefore the land mourns,
and all who dwell in it languish,*

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

*and also the beasts of the field
and the birds of the heavens,
and even the fish of the sea are taken away.*

This is the Word of the Lord.

Notice how verse 1 begins by speaking to the children of Israel. And the first child spoken of is Jezreel. Why do I say that? Jezreel refers to bloodshed. We saw that in chapter 1, verse 4. Now in chapter 4, verse 2, we read that in Israel there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.

This is a picture of a nation who breaks the Ten Commandments. They break the commandments that have to do with loving our neighbor as ourselves.² They swear, lie, murder, steal, and commit adultery. But these sins are simply symptoms of a deeper disease. What's the real problem? What's the disease?

People don't love others because they don't love God. Look at verse 1. "There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land."

That phrase "no knowledge of God" is critical to this whole passage. The word knowledge there in Hebrew refers to relationship.³ It refers to experience.

Some of you here are battling cancer. Who knows more about cancer? An oncologist or a cancer patient? Well it depends. An oncologist knows more about the way cancer works medically. But only a cancer patient really knows what it's like to have cancer. Only they know the real pain, and the fight, and the discouragement.

When this verse says there's no knowledge of God in the land it's not talking about textbook knowledge. It's not clinical knowledge. It's referring to experiential knowledge. It's referring to relational knowledge. The problem is they don't know their God.

We experience all the sins against our neighbor spoken of in this passage. We see lying, and murder, and stealing, and adultery all around us. We see it in the culture. And we even see it in the church. Especially if we read the Sermon on the Mount and see murder as hatred and adultery as lust.

Why do people sin against their neighbor? It's because they don't know God. The culture sins because they have no relationship with God *at all*. And the church sins because we have a shallow view of relationship with God. A relationship with God involves faithfulness. It's not only about getting right with God. It's about living right. It's not only about receiving God's love. It's about loving God and loving others in return. To know God, you have to be faithful to God; you have to love God and love other people.

At First Free we know a lot about God. We have a lot of information. But God's looking for more than information. God wants transformation. He wants the truth to transform our living. He wants his love to transform our loving.

² Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, The New American Commentary

³ קִדַּח in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* and *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*

Do you have a relationship with God? Well to answer that question, we need to answer another question. Do we love other people? Sadly, we've become so infatuated with ourselves. We love ourselves more than others. This is what David Wells says.

Much of the Church today, especially that part of it which is evangelical, is in captivity to this idolatry of the self. This is a form of corruption far more profound than the list of infractions that typically pop into our minds when we hear the word "sin." We are trying to hold at bay the gnats of small sins while swallowing the camel of self. It is idolatry as pervasive and as spiritually debilitating as were many of the entanglements with pagan religions recounted for us in the Old Testament.

It is as powerful an organizing center as any god or goddess on the market. The contemporary Church is whoring after this god as assiduously as the Israelites in their darker days. It is baptizing as faith the pride that leads us to think much about ourselves and much of ourselves.⁴

Israel wasn't loving their neighbor, because they didn't love God. They didn't know their God. They had a shallow and broken relationship with him. What about you?

NOT MY PEOPLE (4:4-14)

The second child this passage speaks of is Lo-Ammi, which means Not My People (1:9). This second child is drawn out in chapter 4, verses 4-14. Notice how many times God refers to "my people" (vv. 6, 8, 12).

Hosea 4:4-10

⁴*Yet let no one contend,
and let none accuse,
for with you is my contention, O priest.*

⁵*You shall stumble by day;
the prophet also shall stumble with you by night;
and I will destroy your mother.*

⁶*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge;
because you have rejected knowledge,
I reject you from being a priest to me.
And since you have forgotten the law of your God,
I also will forget your children.*

⁷*The more they increased,
the more they sinned against me;
I will change their glory into shame.*

⁸*They feed on the sin of my people;
they are greedy for their iniquity.*

⁹*And it shall be like people, like priest;
I will punish them for their ways
and repay them for their deeds.*

¹⁰*They shall eat, but not be satisfied;
they shall play the whore, but not multiply,*

⁴ David Wells, quoted in Greg Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 294

*because they have forsaken the LORD
to cherish ¹¹whoredom, wine, and new wine,
which take away the understanding.*

God's people in this section are destroyed and rejected (vv. 6, 9). His children are Not His People. But why? People are rejected by God (in part) because of their leaders. Israel was rejected because of their priests and prophets. Notice what verse 4 says, "Yet let no one contend and let none accuse, for with you is my contention, O priest."

There is a principle in leadership. People can't go further than their leaders. John Maxwell calls this the law of the lid. The higher the leadership lid, the higher the potential of the people you lead. The lower the lid, the lower the potential. Maxwell uses the example of McDonald's. The McDonald brothers came up with a great concept. But they could never take their idea further than one restaurant. It wasn't until Ray Kroc got involved that "millions were served." The McDonald brothers had a low lid. Kroc had a high lid.

The reason Israel was rejected by God was first and foremost because of their leaders. They had a very low lid! It was a classic example of the blind leading the blind. We read in verse 5, "You shall stumble by day; the prophet also shall stumble with you by night." In other words the leaders in Israel were blind.

The reason Israel didn't know God relationally is because they didn't know *about* God. Their leaders weren't teaching them God's word. Their leaders rejected knowledge (v. 6a). They forgot the law of their God (v. 6b).

Christianity is all about relationship. But it's a revelation-response relationship. It starts with God's revelation; it starts with God's Word. And our relationship with God is all about how we respond to God's Word (a revelation-response relationship).

The priests had rejected God's revelation. They rejected his word. So they weren't teaching the people the word. And you can't know God if you don't know his word. But why did the priests reject God's word? What did they reject it *for*? They rejected God's word for idols. That's why they were blind. They had become like their idols.

We were all created in the image of God. We're supposed to become like God, and reflect his glory. We're supposed to be conformed into his image according to his Word. But when we worship idols, we become like our idols.

The idols Israel worshiped were often made in the image of a calf. They were deaf, dumb, and blind calves. And so the Israelites became deaf, and dumb, and blind like idols.

This is the way Psalm 115:4-8 puts it:

Psalm 115:4-8

*⁴Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of human hands
⁵They have mouths, but do not speak;
eyes, but do not see.
⁶They have ears, but do not hear;
noses, but do not smell.*

⁷*They have hands, but do not feel;
feet, but do not walk;
and they do not make a sound in their throat.*
⁸*Those who make them become like them;
so do all who trust in them.*

The priests had become blind like their idols. And the blind were now leading the blind. Instead of reflecting God's glory, they reflected the shame of their idols. Verse 7 says, "I will change their glory into shame." Psalm 106:20 says it this way: "They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass." The priests in Israel resembled their idols. God changed their glory into shame.

Greg Beale says we resemble what we revere either for ruin or restoration.⁵ The priests revered idols instead of God and his word. So they came to resemble their idols for their ruin. They rejected God's word. They rejected knowledge. So God rejected them. As verse 9 says, "And it shall be like people, like priest." The blind were leading the blind over a cliff into destruction.

They were so blind to God's word they began to see idolatry as a good thing. This comes out in verses 12-13.

Hosea 4:12-13a

¹²*My people inquire of a piece of wood,
and their walking staff gives them oracles.
For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray,
and they have left their God to play the whore.*
¹³*They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains
and burn offerings on the hills,
under oak, poplar, and terebinth,
because their shade is good.*

There's a difficult truth in these verses. Sin and idolatry seem good. They do bring comfort and pleasure. They can bring temporary happiness. And when things feel good and make you happy it's easy to be blinded. And it's easy to justify engaging in sin and idolatry. What did Sheryl Crow say? "If it makes you happy then it can't be that bad." That's what's going on here. Israel thinks their idolatry is good because it makes them happy. This is the way one commentator puts it.

In order to appreciate fully the lament concerning their going to hills and shade trees to offer sacrifices, we need to understand how this activity could be attractive. The "sacrifices" were not simply for the gods but were eaten by human participants. In a beautiful setting in the hills and under trees, the people could experience something that combined a picnic with "sacred mysteries."

Also in these mountain shrines they enjoyed freedom from the restraints of the strict morality imposed by orthodox Yahwism. This, combined with a belief that these gods and their rites had the power to insure good crops and healthy births in their flocks and herds, made for a religion as irresistible as it was corrupting.

It's so easy to fall into idolatry. It's really attractive. But the reason this idolatry seemed good was because they didn't realize what the best looked like. They didn't realize that life in relationship with God was better, because they hadn't been *taught* God's word. They were like the ignorant child in

⁵ Beale, 49

The Weight of Glory who was making mud pies in a slum because he couldn't imagine the offer of a holiday at the sea. They were far too easily pleased.

They exchanged the glory of God for the shame of idols. But they did this in part because they weren't taught the knowledge of God. They were rejected in part because of their leaders.

NO MERCY (4:15-5:15)

The third child in our passage is Lo-Ruhama, which means No Mercy. The question I want to answer is "Why does God say he will be merciless with Israel?" This is a much longer section. And the answer comes in three parts.

The people are spiritually insensitive.

The first part is found in chapter 4, verses 15-19.

Hosea 4:15-19

¹⁵*Though you play the whore, O Israel,
let not Judah become guilty.
Enter not into Gilgal,
nor go up to Beth-aven,
and swear not, "As the LORD lives."*

¹⁶*Like a stubborn heifer,
Israel is stubborn;
can the LORD now feed them
like a lamb in a broad pasture?*

¹⁷*Ephraim is joined to idols;
leave him alone.*

¹⁸*When their drink is gone, they give themselves to whoring;
their rulers dearly love shame.*

¹⁹*A wind has wrapped them in its wings,
and they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices.*

So what's the first reason God is merciless with Israel? Why does he tell Judah to leave him alone? This is what we learn. There is no mercy for people who are spiritually insensitive.

Remember what we said earlier? We resemble what we revere either for ruin or restoration. And Israel was beginning to resemble the golden calves that they worshiped. That comes out in verse 16. Israel had become like a stubborn heifer.

God's saying, "Do you like your idols? I hope so, because you've become like them." Idols are deaf and dumb and blind. They're physically insensitive. And Israel has become like them. They've become spiritually insensitive. They're like a stubborn heifer who does what she wants to do. She won't be led. So how can God feed them like a lamb in a broad pasture? She's gone her own way. So she must be left alone.

You may be thinking; how does this apply to us? We don't worship golden calves! But we do still engage in idolatry. And our idols do shape us. We become like them.

Think of the modern idol of our smart phones. This is an idol that promises immediate gratification with little to no effort. Everything is right there at your fingertips. But think of the ways that phone has changed you. It's hindered your ability to pay attention to anything that requires much time or thought. It's made it harder for you to be alone and in silence. Pascal once said, "All men's miseries derive from not being able to sit in a quiet room alone." Has your phone hindered your ability to do just that?

Has your phone made you spiritually insensitive? If you can't give deep attention to things, if you can't spend much time alone and in silence, then how are you going to grow in your relationship with God? How are you going to listen to God and speak to God? How are you going to meditate on his Word and labor in prayer?

Don't let your idols make you in their image. If you do, you won't have spiritual sensitivity to God's mercy.

What do you think when you hear that God has No Mercy on Israel? Does it seem mean or capricious? God's not being mean or capricious. He's punishing them by making them like their idols.

Many people think that hell is mean and capricious too. But C.S. Lewis once said, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'"

Or to quote a modern theologian, this is what God says to those who end up in hell, away from his mercy: "You didn't want to spend your life in fellowship with me and my people on earth. All right, I will give you what you wanted on earth for eternity: separation from God and his people."⁶

So the first reason God has no mercy on Israel is because they're spiritually insensitive. And stubborn.

The people are proud.

The second reason God has no mercy on Israel is found in chapter 5, verses 1-7.

Hosea 5:1-7

^{5:1}*Hear this, O priests!*

Pay attention, O house of Israel!

Give ear, O house of the king!

For the judgment is for you;

for you have been a snare at Mizpah

and a net spread upon Tabor.

²*And the revolters have gone deep into slaughter,*

but I will discipline all of them.

³*I know Ephraim,*

and Israel is not hidden from me;

for now, O Ephraim, you have played the whore;

Israel is defiled.

⁶ Beale, 47

*⁴Their deeds do not permit them
to return to their God.
For the spirit of whoredom is within them,
and they know not the LORD.*

*⁵The pride of Israel testifies to his face;
Israel and Ephraim shall stumble in his guilt;
Judah also shall stumble with them.*

*⁶With their flocks and herds they shall go
to seek the LORD,
but they will not find him;
he has withdrawn from them.*

*⁷They have dealt faithlessly with the LORD;
for they have borne alien children.
Now the new moon shall devour them with their fields.*

So what's the second reason God shows no mercy? Why does verse 4 say, "Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God?" This seems harsh. But again it has to do with the people. There is no mercy for people who are proud.

Notice in verse 1 there are three groups of people addressed. There are the priests and the kings and the "house of Israel." The house of Israel probably refers to powerful people in Israel—the middle and upper class who owned land.⁷ These people are not only powerful, they're also proud.

Verses 6 tells us these important people are also religious people. They go to the house of God and offer sacrifices. But they don't actually know God. They don't have a relationship with him. Verse 3 tells us that God knows them. And verse 4 tells us what God knows. He knows they don't know him.

Verse 5 says, "The pride of Israel testifies to his face." This is the key verse in this section. The reason they don't know God is they have no need for God. That's the problem with privilege, pride, and power. It blinds us to our need for God.

This is a live issue for almost everybody here. There's nothing wrong with having possessions and holding positions of power. But when it results in pride that runs so deep that it keeps us from having penitent hearts then it's a problem. We can't access the mercy of God if we don't see our need for it!

The people place their trust in politics.

The third reason God has no mercy on Israel is found in chapter 5, verses 8-15.

Hosea 5:8-15

*⁸Blow the horn in Gibeah,
the trumpet in Ramah.
Sound the alarm at Beth-aven;
we follow you, O Benjamin!*

⁷ Garrett

⁹*Ephraim shall become a desolation
in the day of punishment;
among the tribes of Israel
I make known what is sure.*

¹⁰*The princes of Judah have become
like those who move the landmark;
upon them I will pour out
my wrath like water.*

¹¹*Ephraim is oppressed, crushed in judgment,
because he was determined to go after filth.*

¹²*But I am like a moth to Ephraim,
and like dry rot to the house of Judah.*

¹³*When Ephraim saw his sickness,
and Judah his wound,
then Ephraim went to Assyria,
and sent to the great king.
But he is not able to cure you
or heal your wound.*

¹⁴*For I will be like a lion to Ephraim,
and like a young lion to the house of Judah.
I, even I, will tear and go away;
I will carry off, and no one shall rescue.*

¹⁵*I will return again to my place,
until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face,
and in their distress earnestly seek me.*

God's lack of mercy comes out in verse 12. God says "I am like a moth to Ephraim, and like dry rot to the house of Judah." He's like a maggot or gangrene. In verse 14 God says, he's like a lion. He's going to eat Israel's lunch. But why? There is no mercy for people who trust in politics.

Look at verse 11. "Ephraim is oppressed, crushed in judgment, because he was determined to go after filth." The filth that is spoken of here was Assyria. We've seen Israel running after idols. Now we see them running after political alliances to save them. When they see their time is about out, it doesn't lead them to turn to God in repentance. It leads them to turn to Assyria. This is confirmed in verse 13. "When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his wound, then Ephraim went to Assyria, and sent to the great king. But he is not able to cure you or heal your wound."

But here's the irony. The nation that Israel goes to is the one who eventually destroys them.⁸ Actually, *God* destroys Israel, but with poetic justice, he uses Assyria to make the hit.

We see our time running out in this country as well. We see the unraveling of the moral fabric in this country. But when you see disaster on the horizon, the worst thing you can do is to trust in politicians that promise salvation while propagating the very evil you want to be saved from. But I digress. This passage isn't about the salvation of America. It's about the salvation of God's people.

⁸ McComiskey, Thomas, *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary, Volume 1 Hosea, Joel, and Amos*

Israel looked to other gods to save them. They looked to other nations to save them. And finally God had enough. In verse 15 he says, “I will return again to my place, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face, and in their distress earnestly seek me.”

This is the lesson we learned last week. God wants to restore his people. But he brings restoration through discipline. Chapter 6:1 says he tore Israel that he may heal her. He struck down to bind up.

The problem in Israel is they didn’t know their God. They didn’t have relationship with him. What they needed to do was to return to the LORD. They needed to press on to know the LORD. We’ll talk more about that next week.

The same is true for us today. The only way to find the mercy of God, the only way to become the people of God is through a relationship with God. And the only way to know God is through knowing Jesus. It’s only through Jesus’ death and resurrection that we can be forgiven of our sins and come into relationship with God.

Knowing Christ

There’s great temptation in placing our trust in politics. There’s great temptation to trust in ourselves and be proud. There’s great temptation in finding satisfaction in pleasure. Or as Paul says, to make our belly our god. There’s a great danger in exchanging the glory of God for idols. In other words, there’s a lot in this world to captivate our attention.

But Paul says in Philippians 3, “I count everything loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”

He goes on to say, “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection of the dead.”