
Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: God's provision

All praise to You Almighty God; You are the most amazing Creator, You are the most wonderful lover, You are the most powerful helper, You are the most honest master, You are the most beautiful Saviour, and You are the most awesome God. May our hearts never cease to praise you even when life seems dull or difficult; open our ears that we might hear the angels sing in heaven, and also here on earth. **AMEN**

For myself

Ask the Lord to help you in any difficult situations you face today. If you are not sure whether you face any difficulties, ask the Lord to give you the courage to turn to Him whenever problems arise.

For others

Thank God for the wonderful blessings of family life. You may or may not feel very happy with your family at this moment in time, but do not let that stop you from giving thanks to God for all that is good and lovely and wonderful about those you love and hold dear, and spending time with them.

Meditation

Think again; think about the people you see,
The people you meet and those you pass by.
There are none whose mind and heart,
Whose body, soul, spirit and feelings
Are not precious to the heart of God.

Think again; think about the person you are,
Moulded by your choices and experience.
There is no part of past or present,
Precious memories or future's promise,
Which is not precious to the heart of God.

So think again; think about the family of God,
Those you know who love and worship Him.
There's none within the Kingdom
Less or greater, better or worse than you,
For all are precious in the heart of God.

So think again, and reckon this O child of God,
Who are you to think more grandly of yourself
The Saviour knows the engaging truths
Of every soul yet loves without complaint;
No partiality is found within the heart of God.

Bible Passage

Hosea 4:13-19

- ¹³ Therefore your daughters play the whore,
and your daughters-in-law commit adultery.
- ¹⁴ But I will not punish your daughters
when they play the whore,
nor your daughters-in-law
when they commit adultery;
for the men themselves go aside with whores,
and sacrifice with temple prostitutes;
thus a people without understanding comes to ruin.
- ¹⁵ Though you play the whore, O Israel,
do not let Judah become guilty.
Do not enter into Gilgal,
or go up to Beth-aven,
and do not swear, '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
-- let him alone.
- ¹⁸ When their drinking is ended,
they indulge in sexual orgies;
they love lewdness more than their glory.
- ¹⁹ A wind has wrapped them in its wings,
and they shall be ashamed because of their altars.

Review

This is not a passage of Scripture likely to be read in church on Sunday. This prophecy of Hosea shows his disgust at Israel's rebellion against God, and her adulterous and sexual worship of Ba'al. There are few pleasant features to the text, and no message of hope. So we must make sure that as we read this, we remember the wider picture of God's mercy and love that stands over Hosea's prophecy, lest we get tired of reading about sin. But the Bible

never ceases to reveal human sin. One of the functions of God's Word is to convict the human heart so that repentance will lead to salvation.

We must take something of a deep spiritual breath as we launch into this passage; it may not lead us to the Gospel, but it is still an important part of God's Word. Here, Hosea says more about how God's heart was broken by Israel's worship of the Ba'als, and reveals his disgust at the sexual promiscuity of Ba'al worship (4:13,14). He likens Israel's religion to prostitution (4:15,16) and ends by describing her worship as like 'drunken orgies' (4:18,19)! It is all graphically unpleasant, but just beneath the surface there are some surprising twists and turns to the passage, and Hosea says perhaps more than we might think.

Firstly, the opening verse shows Hosea's (and God's) revulsion at the prostitution of Israel's 'daughters' (4:15). Now, the daughters of Israel were supposed to remain virgins until they were married, in order to keep the ancestry of Israel pure; this was part of Israel's covenant commitment to the Lord. Deviation from God's laws about sexual matters has always been a major contributor to human sin, and Hosea knew this. He says more about this later on in his prophecy, but here, his purpose is to make another point.

Far more than being angry at the prostitution of the '*daughters of Israel*' (4:13), Hosea condemns the men who had sex with these women! Obviously, without men worshipping Ba'al and believing that sex would bring fertility to their crops, there would be none of this kind of prostitution! Hosea was probably influenced here by his disgust at the men who taken his own wife for sex, and he points the finger sharply. These men demonstrate the ignorance of those who have abandoned their understanding of God for sexual thrill, and Hosea prophesies that they condemn the nation to '*ruin*' (4:14). Hosea exposes their sin of wilful ignorance; people who ignore their history, refuse to engage their minds with their faith or read God's Word run the risk of bringing catastrophe down on a nation!

In verse 15, Hosea makes an appeal, concerned lest Israel's sins affect the people of Judah; he says '*do not let Judah become guilty*'. So why does Judah matter? Earlier in his prophecy, Hosea spoke of Judea as being less morally corrupt than Israel (1:11), and if we read the last few chapters of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles we will gain the impression that in the eighth century BC this was indeed true. Hosea was justly concerned lest Ba'al worship in Israel spread as far as Judah and corrupted the capital city of Jerusalem, even the holy Temple. He knew about sin's infectious nature and prayed that it would not compromise God's covenant promises borne by the faithful in Judah.

Was sin to have the victory over all God's people? Hosea prayed not. Northern Israel had become a nation after the days of Solomon (1 Kings 12), when they felt a need to establish a separate religious identity to Judah (1 Kings 12:25f.) and did this by worshipping at a variety of shrines across the land. For example, they used the shrine at Bethel, where Jacob had received a vision before he journeyed to Paran (Genesis 28:1-50). We might think this a very holy place for the worship of God, but as we are told by Amos (Amos 4:4, 5:5,6 etc), Bethel had become polluted by Ba'al worship over many years, and surprisingly, both God and Ba'al were worshipped together at Bethel! Hosea prayed that such things might never happen at the Temple in Jerusalem!

As we read on in verse 15, this theme of prayerful concern lies behind Hosea's words '*do not enter into Gilgal, or go up to Beth-aven*'. What does this mean? In order to answer this we will look at the meaning of these place names. '*Gilgal*' was where Joshua's occupation of the land of Canaan faltered, as he did an ungodly deal with the Gibeonites (Joshua 10:1f.). It was therefore considered to be a place of shame for Israel, and a code-word for 'religious compromise'. The next name is '*Beth-aven*', but there is no such place! Hosea is playing on words, however. Starting with the name of the famous shrine at '*Beth-el*', meaning '*house of God*', Hosea takes away the '-el' part of the word meaning 'God', and adds a Hebrew word for sin, '*-aven*', to make '*Beth-aven*' meaning '*house of sin*'! Hosea is certainly sarcastic!

And in this way, he rebukes the shrine at Bethel for its idolatrous religious practices that have led Israel astray!

Hosea does not let up on his castigation of Israel for her sins. He describes her as like a 'heifer', a young young cow impossible to control (4:16)! This is another insult to a nation that had worshipped a 'golden calf' earlier on in her history (see 1 Kings 12:28f.)! But in the next line we are brought up short by a phrase that seems almost well known; Hosea says in exasperation, '*can the Lord now feed them like a lamb in a broad pasture?*' (4:16). This sounds rather like Psalm 23, where David has a vision of the Lord God leading His people like sheep '*in broad (or green) pastures*' (Psalm 23:1). Did Hosea know this famous psalm and almost quote it? He certainly longed for the purity of worship exemplified by David's Psalms!

This taxing passage comes to an end with yet another devastating picture of Israel sins (4:17-19). But here, we can spot connections not with the Old Testament but with the New, especially the teachings of Jesus. It suggests that Jesus knew Hosea's prophecies and understood the gravity of sin that had caused Israel to wander far from God. Hosea prophesies that God will allow Israel, named here as Ephraim, to go her own way and do her own 'thing'; '*Ephraim is joined to idols - let him alone*' (4:17). So she wanders away from the Lord like a prodigal, yet to come to her senses and return. She is seduced by alcohol (see also 4:11), by the hedonistic pleasures of sex (see also 4:10), and by the pleasure of rebellion itself (4:18). There is no exact fit here with Jesus' parable of the 'Prodigal Son', but its general themes are similar.

It is perhaps helpful that we end in this way with a connection to Jesus, our Saviour. Hosea looked forward to the day when God's love would be shown fully to His wayward children (11:1f.). He did not know Jesus or prophesy directly about Him. But he certainly carved a dramatic pathway through the mire of human sin to expose the need for God's redemption!

Discipleship

Application

Seduced by sex, alcohol and rebellion

It was ever thus! At various times in history, these three have been identified as lying at the heart of the collapse of empires and thrones, industries and more. Perhaps if we really knew who controls the financial world today and the morality of those who are supposed to underpin our national economies today, we might find elements of the same sins. Certainly, when people relinquishing control and honesty in human relationships for secretive pleasure seeking, their moral ability to manage banks, governments, industries and more are compromised, and few are willing to acknowledge this today.

You may say I have been influenced by Hosea and paint a rather too black picture of our world. If this is what you believe, then I suggest that you be careful, for it is by no means certain how our countries, our industries and our governments can sustain their financial probity in the coming years, and experts are agreed that the right action has yet to be taken to get the world's economy on track. No-one is sure what to do!

Watch therefore beneath the surface of what happens, and look for the moral underbelly of those who are responsible for the governance of world, our institutions especially financial one, and our industry today. If the pervading morality is that sex is something like a right to enjoy one's body, that alcohol is the normal drink, and that the rebellion of youth is a fine

thing to be fostered as the source of all new thinking, then we are heading down the pathway of destruction. Watch out; Hosea is more penetratingly relevant than we might think.

Longing for pure worship and the psalms of David

In the midst of all this gloom, you will not have failed to notice Hosea's longing for the pure worship of God, captured in the wonderful phrase '*can the Lord now feed them like a lamb in a broad pasture?*' (4:16). Try to make sure that for you, worship is not primarily something to feed your soul or enjoy, it is a longing for God expressed in song, in words, in listening, talking to others, and in contributing to the worship of God's people. God know the difference between a worshipper who is trying to get an experience, and a worshipper who longs for his true heart.

Ideas for what to do

- *It may be helpful whilst studying Hosea, to try and write down a list of his references to prostitution, and what they mean. It is all very unpleasant, but by doing this, you may get a fuller picture of Hosea's work.*
- *Make a list of religious movements and attitudes that are a danger, in your opinion, to the life of the church. Pray to the Lord and ask Him to remove these from God's people.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In the course of this study, what have you learned about Hosea that is new and helps you understand his prophecies better?
2. Discuss whether these prophecies speak to people today. What can they mean for the church as God's 'New Israel'?
3. What are the real problems of sexual promiscuity within our world today, and how may God's people address them?

Final Prayer

If I have become tired or sorrowful this day, my Lord, please accept my apologies. I have been wrapped up in my own feelings and have failed to see the bigger picture, which is coloured by Your gracious love. Save me from my problems, and lead me to trust in Your guidance and providence. Thank You, my Lord, AMEN
