
Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: God's provision

Praise God for His faithfulness throughout history, to generations before you and to generations yet to come

For myself

Pray for understanding. Ask the Lord to help you understand His will for you, and His eternal purposes. Spend some time thinking about what you believe God intends for you to do this day.

For others

Lord Jesus Christ, we pray today for all who are caught up in one or other form of sexual exploitation. Such things are difficult for us to think about, and it is therefore easy for us to relegate them to a far corner of our minds. With your strength, protection and guidance, give us a heart to accept that such sins exist, open our eyes to any we meet who are in deep need, and open our hearts to help them if at all possible. Some might feel it is crazy to imagine that ordinary people can do something to help those who suffer in this way; but break down barriers, Lord Jesus Christ, so that we are not afraid to set the captives free. **AMEN**

Meditation

I am called by Christ, my Lord and my God:

If I must change, may I do so boldly and with faith:

If I have sinned, may I repent and do what is right:

If I need to do something, may I do it with wisdom:

If I must speak, may I share my faith with all I know;

If I have been silent, may I open my heart to others:

If I need to listen, may I give others my full attention:

If I must be strong, may I rely upon the Spirit's strength;

If I have to show courage, may I be firm in love and faith;

If I need to wait, may I show patience by the grace of God.

I am blessed by Christ, my Lord and my God.

Bible Passage

Hosea 4:7-13

- ⁷ *The more the priests increased,
the more they wandered away from me;
they changed their glory into shame.*
- ⁸ *They feed on the sin of my people;
they are happy with their iniquity.*
- ⁹ *And it will be like people, like priest;
I will punish them for their ways,
and repay them for their deeds.*
- ¹⁰ *They will eat, but not have enough;
they will practice prostitution, but gain nothing;
because they have deserted the Lord
and given themselves to fornication.*
- ¹¹ *Wine and new wine
destroy all understanding.*
- ¹² *My people consult bits of wood!
and discern truth from a stick!
A spirit of prostitution has led them astray,
they have been unfaithful and deserted their God.*
- ¹³ *They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains,
and burn offerings upon the hills,
under oak, poplar, and terebinth,
because their shade is good.*

Review

In this prophesy, Hosea launches a full-scale attack on the priests of Israel, accusing them of being behind Israel's abandonment of a God. As Hosea has already prophesied, their dabbling with other religions is like adultery. Israel was supposed to be married to her God in an eternal covenant of love, and whatever the faults of the people, Hosea lets it be known that her priests bear the primary blame.

Yet again, we must call to mind the truth about the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BC. and its consequences. Undoubtedly, many Israelite people worshipped the Lord their God, otherwise there would not be faithful people within the nation for God to raise up as prophets. However, the history of the religion of Canaan going back to before Israel's conquest is of a land full of Ba'al worship, and as the centuries passed, the beliefs of the ancient people who lived there before Israel arrived raised their heads. It was King Ahab with his wife Jezebel who reintroduced the worship of Ba'al wholesale into Israel, 100 years before the days of Hosea. First Elijah and then Elisha battled with this ancient religion (1 Kings 19 - 2 Kings 11), and although these famous prophets never wrote down their prophecies or left us with written books in Scripture, the next generation of prophets, including Amos and Hosea, did just this. As we read the Bible's prophetic books today we will discover that ultimately, it was the sin of idolatry, described here by Hosea as adultery, that led successive prophets to warn that God would have to first destroy His people Israel

and Judah before the relationship could be restored. In the Old Testament we read of a partial restoration under Ezra and Nehemiah and again after the Babylonian exile, but we only read of a complete restoration of the coming of Jesus in the New Testament.

I have set out this brief history of God's people in the Bible to give perspective to our study today. Hosea's prophecy goes to the 'heart of the matter', and I ask you to bear all this in mind in future studies of this prophecy. The first few verses of chapter 4 in Hosea describe the catastrophic failure of the relationship of Israel and her priests with their God. Our reading today contains Hosea's specific condemnation of the priesthood and its role in this failure.

To be specific, the nation of Israel had in the past endured all manner of false worship by individual Israelites, indeed by individual kings of Israel as well (see king Rehoboam in 1 Kings 12). However, it was the role of the priesthood to stand against apostasy within Israel and give an example of the pure worship of God. Hosea complains in verses 7 and 8 that instead of doing this, the priests had '*fed on the sin of my people*', '*wandered away from me*', and '*changed their glory into shame*'.

Looking at it like this, it is obvious what was going on. The priests had decided to abandon their traditional role of 'defending the faith' to join in with the popular religion of people who were exploring their past and dabbling in ancient religions. The once glorious liturgies, robes, ceremonies and practices of Israel's anointed priesthood, instigated by Moses while Israel travel from Egypt through the desert (Exodus 28-31), were no longer used for their exclusive intended purposes. They were used for the worship of Ba'al. Moreover, the priests were entirely content with what they were doing (4:8). Analysis of what happened in those days tell us that in order to worship Ba'al, people and priests had sex with prostitutes, believing that by so doing, they would increase the fertility of the land, and gain crops for themselves. Crops were important, of course, but such practices shows how far the people had fallen from trusting in God for His provision.

Hosea continues with his relentless expose of sin, shining a light into the dark recesses of Israel's national life. Her faults were staggering, forthrightly exhibiting her rejection of a God who had both formed her and nurtured her, demonstrating centuries of love and compassion towards her people and her leaders. Her 'adultery' could not go unpunished; was Israel to think that her God was not interested in what she did or that her actions did not matter?

God's punishment was not intended merely to make Israel suffer, neither was it random or unmerited punishment in that sense. It was a punishment of loving judgement, designed to make the people come to their senses. So when in verse 9 Hosea prophesies God's punishment on Israel, on both people and priests, He is not vengeful. This is clear from the next verse, where Hosea reports the Lord's sadness at the utter fruitlessness of Israel's sin (4:10); '*they will eat, but not have enough, they will practice prostitution, but gain nothing ...*'. There could be no future for a people who had rejected their own God!

In the last three verses of our passage today, we can hear a sadness in Hosea's voice as his prophecies shed further light on Israel's sins. The already awful picture of idolatrous worship gets even worse. Clearly, alcohol had a part to play in all this; Hosea laments, '*wine and new wine destroy all understanding*' (4:11). Alcohol has always been a good and useful preserver of fluid, especially in times when and in countries where without it, there would be virtually nothing else to drink at certain times of the year. How tragic that its excessive use has led, throughout history, to the downfall of both individual people and even nation states. We might not like to think it, but Scripture knows this truth and does not fight shy of it.

Verses 12 and 13 bewail the idolatry that has overcome Israel, using Hosea's typical description of this as '*prostitution*' (4:12). Idols of Ba'al, made of wood, were worshipped and consulted as divine, and divining sticks were added to the magic arts (4:12), in flat disregard for God's Law (Deuteronomy 18:10f.). Instead of worshipping God at a traditional altar set up

for the purpose, or at a tabernacle, or even at the Temple in Jerusalem, God's people had decided to worship Him 'on tops of mountains' (4:13), the traditional place for pagan worship! Such locations were chosen not because they were anointed by God for the purpose, but because they were pleasant and convenient, and because they represented domination of the landscape.

It is extraordinarily difficult for those of us who have come to love the Lord Jesus Christ to read such things. How can it be that our ancestors in faith so misunderstood their relationship with God that such things happened? Unfortunately, sin is still rampant in our world, and it still affects many who have given themselves to Christ. The great gift of the Old Testament is to remind us repeatedly of the power of such sin and the need to repent. The prophecy of Hosea does just this.

Discipleship

Application

Priests joining with popular religion

Recently, I watched a TV programme about the history of Christianity, and the scholar, a man who had taught me history when I was at theological college, began by describing the Christian faith as 'a personality cult of Jesus'. I was deeply sad; I had to turn off the television, bewildered. A man who at one time professed faith in Christ could now no longer see anything in Jesus other than a minor religion of the world, historically worth exploring, but largely irrelevant to the modern world. It is my belief that bad teaching and bad theology within the universities of the United Kingdom have led a generation of Christian leaders to doubt the truth about God as found in the Bible and historically revealed, and they treat faith in Jesus as nothing more than a cult.

I write this here for one simple reason; I believe such things have led to the same idolatrous adultery in the relationship to God of our own generation as Hosea experienced in his own day, within Israel. Frankly, unless it is spoken about, objected to, opposed, and prophesied against, I am not convinced that the root of the problem will be dealt with, or the Christian church liberated again in the United Kingdom to achieve its godly purposes.

Ideas for what to do

- When the word 'theology' is mentioned, what do you think? The word means 'words about God', so, remind yourself that when you are thinking about your Lord, you are, in fact, doing 'theology'! Do your best to be one of those who delights in the true historic teachings of the Christian church.
- Pray that God will come in judgement on the world of Theology and separate out the good from the bad. No one need fear such a prayer or its consequences, because it is a prayer that seeks the truth.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. From your point of view, what are the sins pointed out by Hosea in this passage that afflict God's people today?

2. Discuss in your group whether there is a limit to how many leaders, ministers or pastors we need within the Christian church. How may we know we have the right number?
3. In what ways do Christian people worship other gods today, and what and who are they?

Final Prayer

Keep me honest, Lord God, I pray. Show me how my life might reflect truth and integrity in the eyes of others; not so that I can claim anything for myself, but so that I might simply do Your will, and accomplish what is right. I ask this prayer in Jesus' name; AMEN
