

Prayers

To God

Give thanks for the way that the Holy Spirit gives you gifts and enables you to do God's will. You may find it hard to do this because you are uncertain about what the Holy Spirit does in your life; if so, then do not draw back, pray and put your heart before God.

For myself

Weekly theme: personal honesty

Lord God, speak to me above the noise of our world. Speak clearly, so that I might not mistake Your voice, as I have done so sometimes in the past. Speak with wisdom, so that I might hear, learn, and do what You have said to me. Speak directly to my heart so that I may know for sure that the voice I have heard is Yours. Speak to me, Lord Jesus, and make Yourself known to me again, and again. **AMEN**

For others

Pray for those who struggle with their health, especially those who have to spend a great deal of time in hospital. Pray for those who look after the sick, especially for doctors, nurses and other hospital staff.

Meditation

You know all things about everything, O lord;
and yet You give of Your time to me.

You hear the sounds of the Universe, O Lord;
and yet You listen to what I say.

You are truth and justice personified, O Lord;
and yet You save me from my sin.

You create new things every day, O Lord;
and yet You rejoice in all I do.

You speak Your Word to the Universe, O Lord;
and yet You whisper in my ear.

Forgive me when I am selfish, O Lord,
and fail to give anything to You.

Bible Passage

Hosea 5:1-7

- 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 The insurgents are deep in 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.
- ⁴ Their deeds do not permit them
to return to their God.
For the spirit of whoredom is within them,
and they know not the LORD.
- ⁵ The pride of Israel testifies to his face;
Israel and Ephraim shall stumble in his guilt;
Judah also shall stumble with them.
- ⁶ With their flocks and herds
they shall go to seek the LORD,
but they will not find Him;
He has withdrawn from them.
- ⁷ They have dealt faithlessly with the LORD;
for they have borne alien children.
Now the new moon shall devour them
along with their fields.

Review

As we begin to read further on into the heart of Hosea's prophecy, we may well wonder where we are going. After the powerful stories of the first three chapters of the book, and one chapter of stunningly cutting prophecies against Israel's sins (chapter 4), does Hosea have anything more positive to say? Is our effort to understand the entire book of Hosea doomed to mire us in continual and unconditional prophecies of gloom?

Well, to a certain extent, the answer is yes. We will indeed have to get used to picking our way through some awful prophecies, but if we do this with care, we should not despair. God's word will come alive to us if we are willing to spend time with it. The generally dire messages delivered by Hosea are certainly tough reading, but if we persist, we will then be

far more ready to deal with and understand the better-known texts, and their generally more positive message (e.g. Hosea 6,11). Indeed, we will discover that in one place, Hosea chapter 6, unless we have fully understood the force of Hosea's negative prophecies, we will completely misunderstand the positive things he says.

At the beginning of chapter 5, Hosea returns to speaking directly to the priests of Israel; he says, *'hear this, O priests!'* (5:1). His words are those of the Lord God speaking directly to those who are supposed to serve him. They are told directly that they are judged for their sins, and there could be no escape. There are consequences to all actions, and the results of sinning are that God will discipline and judge His people (5:1,2); the priests are summoned to hear their judgement.

God's judgement on the priest is extensive. The phrase *'you have been a snare at Mizpah and a net spread upon Tabor'* (5:1) is an eloquent way of saying that God knew what was going on from the far south of the country to the extreme north; in the United Kingdom, we might say 'from Lands End to John O'Groats!' So within the extensive gaze of God, even those of His servants who thought they were safe are found out; God has judged their worship of false gods as like a *'snare'* or a *'trap'* to Israel. Please be aware that the words used by Hosea here do not describe little boxes designed to hold small animals for viewing pleasure; in those days, snares and traps were used to maim and kill, and in some places, they are still used for this today.

There is one small feature of the opening verses we have not yet drawn out, however. Within verse 1, Hosea's prophecy firstly calls on Israel's priests to listen to God's punishment, but after this, Hosea calls upon all Israel to listen to what God says. He addresses them as 'house of Israel', and immediately calls of Israel's king to listen as well! The judgement of the priests for the devilish lie at the heart of their worship will affect every part of Israel's national life; He will *'discipline them all'* (5:2).

Why do God's people so often fail to understand that He knows what is going on within His world, that He knows what is happening within His church and amongst His people, and that rebellion has consequences, whether in Old or New Testament times? In verses 3 and 4, the Lord God pleads with Israel to get a grip of basic truth, as he does to us today. Using the name of 'Ephraim', the largest tribal group within northern Israel, the Lord pours out His heart; He knows what is going on, He has seen Israel's idolatrous worship of other gods, and there are consequences. In a devastating critique of Israel's rebellion, He declares, *'their deeds do not permit them to return to their God'*. If we are in rebellion against God, then he says the same to us now.

Hosea's message has now moved on from mere condemnation, what happened was far more critical than a repairable break. One significant section of Israel, the northern Kingdom, rebelled against Him to such an extent that He had to cut them off because of their sin, and this fact permeates Hosea's words here. He says Israel does not only *'stumble'* (5:5), in search of God, they *'will not find Him'* (5:6)! Because of their idolatrous worship of other gods (5:7), there could be no way back to the living God, even if it was wanted!

This is not a message we find easy to read in the Old Testament, because we are so steeped in the unconditional and inexhaustible love of God revealed in the New. Surely, we say, God had a way of getting round the rebellion of his people, because they certainly survived until the time of Christ. Yes, God found a way of saving a remnant of His people from the southern Israelite state of Judea, who, after the Exile, formed the basis of a new Israel in the fifth century BC which survived until the time of Christ. But that does not mean to say we can ignore the facts of history, and of Scripture, which tell us that the covenant relationship between God and His people in the Northern Kingdom of Israel was broken by the people's adulterous disobedience, never to be remade. When Hosea prophesies that they cannot *'return to their God'* (5:4), and that they *'will not find Him'* (5:6), he means it. This is God's

Word and it is truth, albeit uncomfortable truth, and when the Assyrians invaded Israel in 721BC, they obliterated the land and its people, they took Israelites out of the land and replaced them with foreigners, and the nation of (northern) Israel came to a complete end.

The truth is this. When a heart that once was God's becomes gripped by the power of a sin it has accepted and grown to love, it has turned away from its God and the redeeming power He offers. Now in the New Testament, we know this principle as '*all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God ...*' (Romans 3:23), but at the time Hosea prophesied, this was a radical revelation, at odds with the teaching of the day, which said that all the people of Israel were safe with God merely because they were His people. We should never make the mistake of taking to ourselves such beliefs. Hosea declared that there is no appeasing God; his prophecies declare the eternal truth of God's justice and judgement as non-negotiable.

As a consequence, and although we do not like to think it, the same applies today when God's people go their own way. It is not that God will not do anything to save those who reject Him, it is just that for those who reject the very means God has given for salvation there is no 'plan B' for God's grace! The equivalent today of what the people of northern Israel had done would be for a Christian to reject the death and resurrection of Christ and its power to save, and prefer to go to Yoga!

Discipleship

Application

Answers to a difficult message

In the midst of this prophecy, Hosea says these words, '*they go to seek the Lord, but they will not find Him*' (5:6). I wonder whether Jesus was aware of these words when he changed this around completely to say, '*seek, and you will find ...*' (Matthew 7:7). It seems to me that Jesus alone resolves the awful dilemma of the prophet Hosea. Bearing in mind everything we have learned today, the Christian cannot afford to doubt this saying of Jesus, or suggest that his or her own individual needs and desires stand to gain anything from God as a consequence of this promise.

I have heard some preachers say that it is God's purpose always to bless His people with good things in life. That sounds very good, but it is capable of meaning too many things to different people. Trouble comes when a preacher or congregation believe that such 'good things' mean earthly goods or wealth. Jesus knew full well what He was doing when he said to his disciples '*seek, and you will find ...*'; He was telling them that through Him, they would find God, and the final steps of the pathway travelled by Jewish people for centuries was now open. Be of no doubt, the interpretation of this Scripture is critical to the faith of many people, and it is therefore wise for us to check out the meaning of the prophecy of Hosea that almost certainly contributed to it.

Ideas for what to do

- Occasionally, I find that I am working on the assumption that if I do things right, then I will be OK with God, and have to change my attitude. Is this something you need to check out with yourself?

- Look back over your recent life and ask yourself whether you have 'dealt faithlessly' with God. Remember, if you have, then the way to deal with this is to repent and be open with God about it. Appeal to Jesus for your salvation.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does the passage of Scripture teach us about the nature of sin and the way that it affects us even now?
2. If this text is about the people of Israel, is it about the church today? To what extent does the church of God 'play the whore' today, or is there any good reason to reject this analysis today?
3. Read Matthew 7:1-14 and discuss in your group the connections between these two passages.

Final Prayer

Lead me, Lord God, in a pathway of honest and righteous living. Lord God, I do not want to be the kind of person who is caught out by my own arrogance or found out because of my pride. Keep me in that place of spiritual need where I know that You are my Saviour, all the time. AMEN
