

Prayers

To God

Praise God for the many blessings you have received in recent times, and place before the Lord your hopes and dreams for all that is to come.

For myself

Weekly theme: personal honesty

Come before the Lord to confess your sins and tell Him of your problems. Personal honesty is the prerequisite for true confession and repentance.

For others

Lord Jesus Christ, bless all those who are earnestly seeking to find You. May we, Your people, never place stumbling blocks in the way of those who look to you and seek to find You. May we rather be used to bring people to peace with God through our careful and loving zeal for the Gospel and the salvation of souls. AMEN

Meditation

Lord, I learn about You through opening my heart
To appreciate what is happening all around me.

Through smiling, and seeing other people smile too;
through silence in the face of deep suffering.

Through watching a child learn to walk;
through steadying the hand of an elderly person.

Through eating a meal with friends and family
through sharing what I have with those who have less.

Through listening to the song of birds;
through enjoying the rhythm of a popular song.

Through finding faith and hope and love;
through resting in peace because I know my Lord.

Bible Passage

Hosea 5:8-15

- 8 Sound the trumpet in Gibeah,
the horn in Ramah.
Raise the battle cry in Beth Aven;
lead on, O Benjamin.
- 9 Ephraim will be laid waste
on the day of reckoning.
Among the tribes of Israel
I proclaim what is certain.
- 10 Judah's leaders are like
those who move boundary stones.
I will pour out my wrath on them
like a flood of water.
- 11 Ephraim is oppressed, broken in judgment
and intent on living by regulations.
- 12 I am like a moth to Ephraim,
like rot to the people of Judah.
- 13 When Ephraim saw his sickness,
and Judah his sores,
then Ephraim turned to Assyria,
and sent to the great king for help.
But he is not able to cure you,
not able to heal your sores.
- 14 For I will be like a lion to Ephraim,
like a great lion to Judah.
I will tear them to pieces and go away;
I will carry them off,
with no-one to rescue them.
- 15 Then I will go back to my place
until they admit their guilt.
And they will seek my face;
in their misery they will earnestly seek me.

Review

Our journey through Hosea's prophecy is not easy. In the beginning, Hosea came to realise the truth about Israel's adulterous worship of God, and that it was like the disgusting practices of his wife, a religious prostitute who worshipped Ba'al. He used this similarity to prophesy about the true nature of Israel's rejection of her God, and as we saw yesterday, began to speak about some of its consequences, which were dire. Israel's adulterous worship of other gods meant that she had cut herself off from her true God, and there were consequences to her sin. As we saw yesterday, she had walked so far from her God, there was no turning back.

It was difficult for a man like Hosea to accept that God was speaking through him to announce that there was no escape from the punishment coming on Israel. Even though he had not walked away from God himself, he loved his own nation of God's people. At the time, there were doubtless some who heard him prophecy and accepted his words, but there must have been others who were aghast at what he said and opposed him, probably to his face. We will find more than a hint of this later on within the book of Hosea.

In today's reading, we find Hosea in full flow as a prophet declaring God's wrath;. This is the first place in the book of Hosea where we find this word '*wrath*' in verse 10; it is an important word because it is found more than 150 times in the Old Testament and the idea of the 'wrath of God' has coloured Christian theology for centuries.

Before we go deeper into this passage, or indeed into the book of Hosea, we need to look more closely at the word '*wrath*'. Too often, people imagine that it means unrelenting brute anger, but this is too simplistic. The word 'anger' can mean a number of different things in English, but when used in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word we translate as '*wrath*' mostly refers to God's just anger. As we have found out here, it refers specifically to God's feelings towards those to whom He has been gracious but have rejected Him. I suggest a further picture to explain this; '*wrath*' is what is felt by someone who has loved another but has had that love cruelly and unjustly rejected and ridiculed. The strength of feeling within '*wrath*' is deeper than anger, and covers many things; a sense of betrayal and loss, frustration, fury at injustice, desperate disappointment, and unrequited passion for the one who has acted so wrongly. This does not explain everything about wrath, but it is a start!

The opening words of our passage sounds like a battle cry; Hosea says '*sound the trumpet*', as if summoning an army. As we read through the passage there can be no doubt that war is prophesied; '*raise the battle cry*' (5:8), '*I will pour out my wrath on them*' (5:9), '*Ephraim turned to Assyria and sent to the great King for help*' (5:13), '*I will tear them to pieces ... I will carry them off with no one to rescue them*' (5:14). We are left with no other conclusion, except that Hosea prophesies God's punishment on Israel in the form of war, involving the Assyrians! Moreover, he is not talking about war as we see it in Hollywood movies, he is talking about real war involving ethnic cleansing, the killing of innocents, the decimation of nations, and the shaping of history. It sounds awful, but as we have already seen, history shows that Hosea was right.

Almost each verse of this passage reveals the horrors of war; '*Ephraim will be laid waste*' (5:9), '*Ephraim is oppressed ...*' (5:11), '*He is not able to cure you ... to heal your sores*' (5:13), '*I will be like a lion to Judah ...*' (5:14), '*in their misery they will earnestly seek me ...*' (5:15). It is possible to take any of these phrases out of the passage and interpret them differently; for example, '*Lion of Judah*', close in Hebrew to '*Lion to Judah*', is used by some Christians as a title of God! But you cannot take this whole passage and argue that it is anything other than a description of war as God's judgement on Israel!

There are a number of other interesting features to the passage. As Hosea prophesied the sound of the trumpet in Gibeah, and Ramah, for example, we read this without necessarily knowing what Gibeah and Ramah meant to Hosea and Israel. Gibeah was a small town in Benjamin, renowned as the place of the most awful sinful deeds recorded in the Bible apart from those in Sodom. The story of the rape and murder of the Levite's concubine at Gibeah (Judges 19-21) is one of unparalleled moral depravity, and the name conjures remembrance of it. Ramah, still there today, was a nearby city of Benjamin and the home of Samuel, but it is associated throughout the Old Testament with great strife and sadness (Jer 31:15). Together with the sounding the battle-cry in 'Beth-aven' (see yesterday's study) and Benjamin, Hosea's prophecy uses dramatic words and pictures to drum home his message.

Other phrases leap out at us to offer further insight. Hosea says in verse 10 '*Judah's leaders are like those who move boundary stones*', making the accusation that God's people have

messed about with His provision and Law. This impression is bolstered by Hosea's brief comment in verse 11, saying that Israel was *'intent on living by regulations'*! It is interesting to read this, knowing that God had it in mind to reveal a 'Gospel of His grace' in the fulness of time to replace 'salvation by law' (Romans 1:16,17, 3:15f.).

The message is clear, whatever war was about to come upon the Northern Kingdom of Israel, God would use it to judge His people, and there would be no escape from it *' I will take them to pieces and go away, I will carry them off, with no one to rescue them'* (5:14). This passage and this chapter close with the tragic picture of defeated people wandering aimlessly in the world trying to find their God, *'they will seek my face, in their misery they will earnestly seek'* (5:15).

So where do we go from here? It is an interesting question, for as we will find out tomorrow, Hosea chapter 6 appears to sound a very different tone, beginning as it does with a song about God's healing power (6:1f.). But we must be cautious, because Hosea's dire message cannot be just swept aside as if God is wrathful one moment and loving the next, for no apparent reason - that would be truly deceitful! Here Hosea tells us that the people of Israel were going to the 'King of Assyria' for help, but finding him *'not able to cure you, not able to heal your sores'* (5:13). What did they expect when they had rejected their God!

So as we begin to read the report of God's healing power in Hosea 6, we must be careful to find a way to connect this with the main thrust of Hosea's prophecies. Hosea is not so fickle as to prophesy God's final and absolute judgement of His people one moment and change to praising Him for His healing power the next. He has a consistent message, and in the original Hebrew, Hosea 5 flows into Hosea 6 with no break! Tomorrow, we will have to make sure we keep this consistency of message in mind.

Discipleship

Application

Judgement by war

War is a terrible and brutal thing, and many of us find it hard to read about it in the Old Testament. However, we must be careful not to allow our mercifully peaceful lifestyle to dominate our understanding of real human life and history, which has been being shaped by war from the beginning of what we call civilisation, and before. People who live at a time of war invariably try to work out how God is at work through what they experience, and in doing this they are no different from anyone else.

So Hosea, just like Christians in the First World War or the American War of Independence, sincerely believed that God was at work through the horror of war. Hosea saw that God's people were corrupt morally and spiritually, and the nations was about to be overcome by war, and God revealed to him how this would take place within the overall plan He had for the salvation of the world. The northern kingdom was to be destroyed because she left God behind and went her own way. It was her free choice, with devastating consequences. Without grasping these painful philosophical and theological questions, it is impossible for us to gain any perspective on real history let alone the work of God throughout time. Those of us who live with the luxury of peace should be understanding of those who live at a time of war, for their experiences have shaped our world

Ideas for what to do

- *How easy do you find it to trust God, and, if necessary, confess that your faith has been lived out as a matter of course rather than in the free spirit of a marriage? Think about this issue carefully, and pray about it in a spirit of self examination*
- *What good things about the life of faith have become regulations? If you do certain things by habit and do not know the reasons for them anymore, then try to root them out of your life and replace them with God's free inspiration.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How does this passage of Scripture teach us about attitudes within the church today, and what can we do about this?
2. Discuss verse 11 in your group and try to ascertain what this might be saying to us who live thousands of years later.
3. How significant is the church of God in the affairs of the world today? Are we more important than we think we are?

Final Prayer

Light of my life, Lord Jesus Christ, enter my heart and change me. I cannot know what You will do, how You will change me or what You will do with me, but I welcome You and I am willing to risk all for You. Come and do Your work of grace in my life now, so that I waste no more time thinking about living for You, but do now what I know to be right and true, according to Your light and revelation: AMEN
