

Prayers

To God

Jesus, You heal the wounds of my body, and I thank You.
Holy Spirit, You heal the brokenness of my spirit, and I thank You.
Father God, You heal the sinfulness of my soul, and I thank You.
Take me, and make me whole, to serve You with my life,
Almighty God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN

For myself

Weekly theme: personal honesty

Do you think you are honest with yourself, especially about your own feelings and those times when you do not show yourself in control of your emotions? Bring your thoughts about this to the Lord and ask Him to shine a light into your heart and your soul

For others

Pray for people who work in the many dangerous places of the world, at sea, in mines, or in military forces. Pray for Christians who work in such places and pray that they will show the love of God to others, especially when they need help.

Meditation

Lord God, Almighty Father, Rock of ages,
Inventor, Designer, Composer and Artist.

Flood all my senses with the ecstasy of life,
And overpower the torrid pain of death.

Irradiate me with the brilliance of light,
And absorb the darkest evils of self.

Energise my enthusiastic soul with love,
And purge the dismal paths of gloom.

Stretch my mind with the intricacies of truth,
And burst the selfish myth of supremacy.

Lord God, Almighty Father, Rock of Ages,
Principal, leader, colleague and aide.

Excite me by how much I truly need You,
And colour me with the hues of godliness.

Bible Passage

Hosea 6:1-6

- 1 'Come, let us return to the LORD.
He has torn us but He will heal us;
He has injured us but will bind us up.
- 2 After two days He will revive us;
on the third day He will restore us,
that we may live in His presence.
- 3 Let us know the LORD;
let us pursue our knowledge of Him.
He will appear as surely as the sun rises;
He will come to us like the winter rains,
like the spring rains that water the earth.
- 4 'What will I do with you, Ephraim?
What will I do with you, Judah?
Your love is like the morning mist,
like the early dew that disappears!'
- 5 So I have cut them up with my prophets,
I killed them with the words of my mouth;
my judgments flashed on you like light.
- 6 For I desire mercy, not sacrifice,
and the knowledge of God
rather than burnt offerings.

Review

How easily it is to presume we know all about a Scripture text without digging deep enough! If we read this passage without knowing what went before, and this is what mostly happens when Scripture is read in church on Sunday or studied in house groups, then we will almost certainly get the wrong picture of God's Word. When reading this passage our natural inclination is to receive the message of God's blessings without too much question. So when Hosea says here, '*He has torn us but will heal us, He has injured us but will bind us up ...*' (6:1), we delight to find in this text an example of the saving grace of God, and we quote this passage when offering His healing power to those in need. We also rejoice that an Old Testament prophet has said something close to the Gospel we hold so dear!

But as we read yesterday, Hosea has just delivered what may at the time have been a climactic prophecy declaring the punishment of Israel for her sins and adulterous worship of idols, the punishment being the devastation of war. The entire book of Hosea has been an unhappy tale of what went wrong between Israel and her God, using the example of Hosea's anguished marriage with the temple prostitute Gomer. Most of the prophecies so far have all

explained that God is unrelenting in His pursuit of Israel, but she has turned away from Him and now deserves the punishment of being eliminated as a nation, through catastrophic war! Is Hosea doing a complete 'about turn' by now proclaiming God's healing power for those who turn to Him, as if the previous prophecy of damnation was 'just kidding'?

So what is happening here in this passage? Why does Hosea turn immediately from the wonderful, if not beautiful, words of verses 1 to 3 to say with utter exasperation in verse four, '*what will I do with you, Ephraim ... your love is like the morning mist!*', and then return to utter condemnation and the language of war in verse five, '*I have killed them with the words of my mouth, my judgements flashed on you like light*' (6:5)? We will not get to the bottom of this passage unless we eventually address this question.

But to begin with, there is no doubt that when taken by themselves, verses 1-3, and 6 speak of the mercy of God and as such, they are used extensively in the church today. Hosea's prophecy calls for God's people to return to Him (6:1) so that He can do the work of patching up the damage of the past, '*to heal*' and '*bind up*' (6:1). Then, in a phrase that very quickly reminds a Christian of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, verse 2 adds a powerful picture of hope; '*After two days He will revive us, on the third day He will restore us, that we may live in His presence*' (6:2). With these words, Hosea anticipates God's mercy and hope flowing from day to day, and his prophetic eloquence looks forward to a day when the Saviour Jesus will be raised from the dead 'on the third day'! Verse 3 is a powerful word of encouragement, calling God's people to get to know Him and His eternal provision better; '*let us know the Lord ... He will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth*' (6:3). This, together with the powerful words of verse 6, '*I desire mercy, not sacrifice*', words quoted by Jesus when speaking of the Father heart of God (Matt 9:13, 12:7), is generally enough to trigger the thoughts of a good preacher in producing a powerful Gospel message.

We can only be satisfied with this message, however, if we have turned a blind eye to the prophetic word Hosea has consistently taught. So, in attempting to make sense of the contradictions inherent in this passage, I have come up with the following theory. It is my own theory, not supported by other scholars or Bible commentaries, but I believe it is worth consideration. By all means preach on the love and mercy of God as prompted by this passage, but I ask you to consider the following.

The first three verses of Hosea 6 stand out in the Hebrew text from the rest of Hosea's offices as quite different; the language is different and the poetic rhythm is different. Together with a number of other Bible teachers, I suggest that Hosea is quoting a hymn or a song well known in his day. These words may well have been sung by Israelites who sought God's mercies despite the prevailing religious sympathies of the day, and one Hosea himself loved. But just before quoting this song, Hosea was prophesying in anguish at Israel's apostasy, and immediately after it his words show God's utter exasperation at Israel's unfaithfulness. So why does he quote it?

I suggest that in the midst of his despair at Israel, Hosea could do no other than remind the nation of a purer approach to God. He seems to say something like this, 'if only God's people would turn to him like this, as they have done in the past'. The hymn is a tantalising glimpse of a right relationship with God in the midst of the horror of everything Hosea prophesies, which is why after quoting it, Hosea calls out in exasperation once more (6:4). Reminded of the loving mercy of God that always holds out hope for restoration, and exhausted by Israel's insistence on sacrificial worship that has led her astray, Hosea finally calls out what may be his most memorable prophecy, '*I desire mercy, not sacrifice*' (6:6).

Here in chapter 6, we begin to read something of Hosea's humanity as a prophet. He was deeply hurt by the rejection he suffered in his marriage, but longed for reconciliation. He knew there was no just way of dealing with the adulterous practices of his wife, but that did

not stop him longing for his love to be fulfilled, and he began to believe that this was also true of God. He prophesied accordingly, and did so consistently.

His words proved right, and the northern nation of Israel paid the price of her sins and was obliterated from the landscape of history in 721 BC, but that does not mean to say that all Israelites lost touch with the covenant God of their fathers. Individuals returned to faith in God, and history shows that when the people of Judah returned from Babylon in the late fifth century BC, they worked hard to reunite all Israelites, of whatever tribe or whatever history in the north or south, around Jerusalem and the pure worship of God in the Temple. This remnant of God's people, described in the books of Nehemiah at Ezra, formed the basis of the nation of Jewish people who survived until the days of Jesus. I like to think that hymns like this in Hosea 6:1-3 helped remind the faithful of the truth about God. Certainly, these words were not included in Hosea's prophecy in vain, moreover, their glory is that they do indeed point to the restoration God has given us in the resurrection of Christ.

Discipleship

Application

The paradox of God's love and His wrath

It is probably no accident that Hosea's prophecy of God's love comes almost immediately after his first mention of God's wrath. In the Bible as a whole, the two tend to get together. The prophet Isaiah, speaking in Jerusalem only a few decades later, found that when prophesying, his words swung from one to the other with extraordinary consistency (see Isaiah chapters 1-5).

Unfortunately, Christians tend to emphasise one or the other, when in truth, if we want to reflect the heart of God, we must represent both. We are used to speaking about God's love today, because this is the best way for us to get the gospel message across in many parts of the world today. However, God's wrath tells us about His ultimate judgement of the world and all things, a theme that is found consistently in the teachings of Jesus (see parables of the kingdom in Matthew 25) and throughout the Bible. There may be good social reasons why it may be right or wrong to preach about God's wrath within society at large, but we cannot afford to ignore this aspect of God's just nature; evil and wrong doing must have their consequences in God's sight.

The blessings of God's love

The wonderful message of this passage of Scripture has been a blessing to many people for many years, and it should remain a treasure of the church. Just because we need to look at it carefully within our study, this does not mean to say we cannot use Hosea's hymn as it was originally intended. Hosea spoke it out of frustration, not because it did not reveal the truth, but because Israel has abandoned everything it stood for.

We should continue to value this passage as a prophecy revealing God's promise to be faithful to all who turn to Him in healing power. It speaks of His continual concern to bless, of His desire to respond to those who turn to Him, and His faithful provision of what is needed for life to continue on this planet. At every level, this is a powerful and amazingly helpful passage of Scripture, quite unlike most of the rest of the prophecy of Hosea.

Ideas for what to do

- *How does your own church practice healing ministry? Think about how this is done, and keep this passage of Scripture in mind. Does Hosea have something to say to us? I am not sure I am in a position to say how the Lord can use this Scripture, but I am convinced that he will use this amongst us today if we are willing to read Hosea's prophecies exactly for what they are.*
- *Read the words of verse 6 again, and take time to share them with someone else. Be careful to explain to them the difference between Hosea talking about 'burnt offerings' and the language we use today about forms of worship.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage of Scripture say about God's help for those who are suffering?
2. Is it right for us to understand that God's help for His people is conditional? Why is it not unconditional?
3. Discuss in your group; what is the 'early morning dew' or the 'mist' that disappears (see verse 4)? How can God's people avoid the trap of false worship?

Final Prayer

Set us free, Lord Jesus, to live in truth of heart and soul. May we speak only what is a true reflection of our thoughts and feelings; may we do for You what You have asked of us because we really want to; and may we listen actively for what is good and worthy within what others say. Set us free, Lord Jesus, to be like You: AMEN
