
Prayers

To God

Give the Lord God the glory for your health and your wealth; and if you are having difficulty with any of these things, continue to give the Lord the glory for His blessings. Anticipate the glory of knowing your sins forgiven in heaven and praise Him here on earth.

For myself

Weekly theme: personal honesty

Offer to the Lord your true feelings about people you find difficult. Ask the Lord to help you deal with these people well, and draw the sting of your feelings about them by turning to Him.

For others

We praise You, Living Lord, for You have a plan for the whole of Your Creation, and for all Your people, and You have given us the privilege of living in Your world. Help us therefore not just to enjoy the great benefits of what we have received, but also to look after it, maintain it and manage it. May all who seek to do what is right within the world find fulfilment in looking after it, Your great gift to us, to Your praise and glory. Thanks be to God, AMEN

Meditation

Powerful Lord of all, Creator and Redeemer
How and where will the Spirit's cry be heard?
When will Your hurricane bring its cleansing
And show again that love will conquer all?

In this tawdry world of evasion and pretence
Where truth is private and appearance is all,
When will Your honest justice confront us
With the truth about the sins we won't confess.

In a world where those who govern lives
Manoeuvre round the edges of hidden power,
Shout a louder cry of 'justice' in the ears of all
And show the Gospel's teeth to topple empires.

In a world of strutting idols called celebrities
Where fickle daily fashions claim our worship,
Bring down the arrogant illusions of popularity
And raise up quality prophets of the Word.

Shock us with the truth of life, Lord Jesus Christ,
And change this world by love and justice, NOW.

Bible Passage

Hosea 7:1-10

- 1 However much I would heal Israel,
the sins of Ephraim are revealed,
and the crimes of Samaria;
for they practice deception;
thieves break in and thugs raid
in broad daylight!*
- 2 But they do not understand
that I remember all their evil.
Their deeds engulf them even now;
they are always before me.*
- 3 By their evil they make the king glad,
and the officials by their treachery.*
- 4 They are all adulterers;
Like an oven heated by the baker
who ceases to stir the fire,
from kneading the dough till it rises.*
- 5 On the day of our king,
the officials made him ill, drunk with wine;
he held out his hand with scoffers.*
- 6 For they brought their scheming
With oven heated hearts;
They baked all night in their sleep;
and in the morning it blazed
like a flaming fire!*
- 7 All of them were as hot as an oven;
they devoured their rulers.
Now all their kings have fallen,
yet none of them calls on me.*
- 8 Ephraim mixes himself with the nations;
Ephraim is like a cake not turned.*
- 9 Strangers drain his strength,
and he knows it not;
his hair is speckled with grey,*

and he does not know it!
¹⁰ *Israel's pride testifies against him, yet
they do not return to the LORD their God,
nor seek him, for all this.*

Review

You may well read today's passage from Hosea with apprehension. While the first three chapters of Hosea were fascinating and filled with intrigue, everything we have read subsequently has been considerably heavier reading. Chapters 4 and 5 contain Hosea's increasingly devastating prophecies against the priests for leading the people astray. At its climax, Hosea's prophecy declares that Israel will be punished by war sent by God, with a devastation that will ruin Israel for ever (5:8-15); so what more can be said? Hosea's hope of God's restoration and healing (chapter 6) represents a truth, but one that God's people were not accessing. So what more can Hosea say? Is there anything new here, or are we just continuing with Hosea's messages of gloom, but with different examples and word pictures?

The answer to this question is both 'yes', and 'no'. Hosea, like many of the Old Testament prophets, had a single message from God and delivered it consistently, and we should not expect him to wander off message. On the other hand, Hosea does not repeat himself without reason, and although we may be bewildered by his words, his message contains more. Hosea condemns Israel for her sin of religious adultery and idolatry, but he must deliver this message to more people, and his words, being prophecy, penetrate further than their original target.

After delivering a devastating critique of Israel (ch.5) and then showing his frustration at Israel's wandering away from the love of God (6:1-4, also here in 7:1), Hosea now does two things. Firstly, he meditates on some of the sins that have led Israel to this tragic point. He says, for example, '*they practised deception*' (7:1), '*they do not understand that I remember all their evil, their deeds engulfed them even now, they are always before me*' (7:2), '*they brought their scheming with other heated hearts, they baked all night in their sleep and in the morning it blazed like a flaming fire*' (7:6). We must delve further into these prophecies to see what they say to God's people of ancient times, and also to us today.

Secondly, it will not have escaped your notice that instead of making comments about priests, Hosea now perceives the objects of God's wrath as the kings of Israel and their court officials; '*by their evil they make the King glad*' (7:3), '*on the day of our king ... the officials made him ... drunk with wine*' (7:5), '*now all their kings have fallen*' (7:7). So we must now look at Hosea's prophecies to see what they say about the sins of Israel's northern Kings; certainly, our passage seems to be dipping into a fair amount of the political gossip of the day. It seems that the government of Israel must now bear their responsibility for the downfall of God's people.

The whole prophecy both begins and ends with the assumption that God is constantly holding out his hands to His wayward people, and we should not forget this. At the beginning, Hosea paints a picture of God desperately wanting to heal Israel, he prophesies, '*however much I would heal Israel ...*' (7:1); then at the end, Hosea complains that Israel will not '*return to the Lord ...*' (7:10), even though He continues to wait for her. Just as Gomer rebelled against Hosea, God's people rebelled against their Lord, and both Hosea and God knows the anguish of their rejection. So what is happening between verses 1 and 10 to touch Hosea's heart and make him prophesy in this way?

In order to understand the message, imagine an oriental court in which a King sits in the centre of a room on a throne, with all the officials of the Kingdom gathered around him, along with prophets and 'wise men'. Everyone around the King is seeking to advise and influence him, because he is the only one with real power, and there is much intrigue and suspicion. However, in those days, Hosea with other prophets of God are marginalised and can only watch what happens at the very edge of the court, in dismay at the antics of those who are attempting to curry favour with the king.

As we read this passage with these things in mind, several things begin to jump out at us. Verses 1 to 4 give a clear picture of the king's officials scurrying around doing all these things. Some have wormed their way into the court to promote themselves and their own interests; they '*practice deception*' (7:1), and do their best to appease the king to get what they want, '*by their evil they make the king glad*' (7:3). We can imagine the pressures pent up as people try to get their own way with the king. Hosea describes the scene as like an untended fire about to overheat, '*they are like an oven heated by a baker, who ceases to stir the fire ...*' (7:4). This is a tawdry way to do business and run a country, and intelligent prophets concerned for justice and the godly rule of law stand sidelined.

Hosea does not let up on his picture, to his own disgust he had witnessed these things first hand. A king in Israel was supposed to be the bedrock of morality and godliness, but the governance of God's people was a laughing-stock. Before long, he pours further scorn on the governance of his country; the 'furnace' of the court has overheated (7:6)! The officials make the King drunk (7:5), relentlessly pursuing their own interests, '*they brought their scheming with oven heated hearts ... all of them were as hot as an oven*' (7:6,7). Such scheming and evil represents the abandonment of God as the supreme ruler of Israel; moreover, the voice of the 'wise men' and prophets can no longer be heard in the midst of such chaos and manoeuvring, and the people concerned do not perceive how their actions have compromised the very nation they pretend to govern; '*they devoured their rulers, now all their Kings have fallen, yet none of them calls on me*' (7:7). Israel's Kings were corrupted by power and their strength was now drained (7:9)!

We do not know whether Hosea was prophesying in reaction to any specific incident at court, but the prophecy reflects his general sense of gloom at the godlessness of those who should be godly; the leaders of Israel. We can nevertheless learn a number of things from this passage. On the one hand, it is a warning about the corruption of power, something we see in the world today and even at times in our own governments. On the other hand, it is a warning about how even well meaning leaders can be drawn into ungodliness as they struggle to engage with the processes of power.

Now we have a context for understanding Hosea's words here we can begin to understand something of his message for the people of his day; his exposure of Israel's godlessness was not just confined to the religious actions of priests, it was a critique of the government of his day. His words also speak directly to us about much that happens today in the name of 'government', whether the government of the country or the church. Few of us have not struggled, just like Hosea, to understand why people in positions of power fall from grace so quickly and bring church and nation into disrepute. Hosea's prophetic words remind us that God sees all this and is waiting with arms outstretched to give us His solutions to our problems.

Discipleship

Application

The temptations of power, wandering away from God's love?

The temptations of power are well known, and those who have to exercise positions of power and influence within the church need to be aware that they are not automatically protected from its corruptions. Cautionary tales from across history remind us of what happens when those who lead God's people become corrupted by the acclamation they have received. How can we be protected from such things? The first thing is to recognise is that God is always seeking to protect His people, and His hands are always stretched out to us to bless and heal, but we must not allow ourselves to be blind to the possibilities of godlessness amongst any Christian leaders.

You may feel that I am being hard, but I have seen the dire consequences of some who assume leadership in Christ's church. They take authority to themselves and wreak havoc, believing that their opinions are God's express will, without doing what Scripture requires, and having their 'word' checked at every stage with Scripture and God's revelation to His people at large. Just because someone is a leader, a Bible teacher, a preacher, an evangelist, does not mean to say that they are always wiser than us and their words and actions are to be like those of God to us. No one is like God for us; only Christ is Lord and God for us, and the sooner we treat our great leaders with more cautious respect not more, the better for them and for the health of God's people.

Ideas for what to do

- This reading makes us think about how difficult it must be, to be a leader of God's people. It is indeed true that there are many pressures on leaders, but we must be careful about what these are, given the nature of this prophecy. What can you do to help alleviate the pressures on your leadership, and help maintain their godly perspective?
- Pray for your own country and its leaders at this time, especially if something of Hosea's prophecies suggest the reasons why your own government is not as godly as you would expect.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage tell us about the life of the church today and the importance of its leadership?
2. What does this passage tell us about the life of your nation and its leaders today, and the significance of current affairs?
3. How can God continue to love and save people who persistently reject Him?

Final Prayer

Lord and Father of all, You see all things and you understand the affairs of churches and nations. Protect the godly people You have placed in positions of authority both in church and nation, and help Your people to support their leaders in prayerfulness and gratitude, all their days: AMEN
